

NATURALISM, THEISM, OBLIGATION AND SUPERVENIENCE

Alvin Plantinga

Take naturalism to be the idea that there is no such person as God or anything like God. Many philosophers hold that naturalism can accommodate serious moral realism. Many philosophers (and many of the same philosophers) also believe that moral properties supervene on non-moral properties, and even on naturalistic properties (where a naturalistic property is one such that its exemplification is compatible with naturalism). I agree that they do thus supervene, and argue that this makes trouble for anyone hoping to argue that naturalism can accommodate morality.

Naturalism in philosophy is all the rage these days. Some naturalists believe that naturalism can accommodate morality—genuine objective moral obligation, for example; they think moral realism, including moral realism about obligation, is compatible with naturalism. Many others, both theists and naturalists, believe that naturalism *cannot* accommodate morality.¹ Some who think naturalism and moral realism incompatible, accept naturalism, apply *modus ponens*, and conclude that moral realism is false. Others think moral realism is clearly true; sensibly enough they apply *modus tollens*, concluding that naturalism is false. I propose to support the claim that naturalism cannot accommodate morality—not by showing directly that it can't, but by displaying the failure of the most natural way of arguing that it can.

I. Naturalism, Realism and Theism

An intuitively plausible way, perhaps the most plausible way, to make a case for the thought that naturalism *can* accommodate morality is to argue for the following thesis:

EQUIVALENCE: For any moral property *M*, there is a naturalistically acceptable property *P* such that N (for any *x*, *x* has *M* if and only if *x* has *P*)

¹For example, Michael Rea, "Naturalism and Moral Realism," in *Knowledge and Reality*, ed. Thomas Crisp, David Vander Laan and Matthew Davidson (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2006); Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), essays 6 and 7; Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons, "Troubles on Moral Twin Earth: Moral Queerness Revived," *Synthese* 92.2 (1992), pp. 221–260; J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin Books, 1977); and many others.



where 'N' expresses metaphysical or broadly logical necessity.

True, those who argue that naturalism can accommodate morality do not typically argue in this way, at any rate not explicitly. But sometimes they do,² and often when they don't do so, their mode of arguing, if made fully explicit, would involve this procedure. For example, consider the way in which David O. Brink proposes that naturalism can accommodate morality.³ His idea is that moral properties are exhaustively *constituted* by naturalistic properties. But what is this 'constitution'; under what conditions is a property constituted by other properties? Brink doesn't say a lot about this, but he does give examples of constitution. One kind of example involves an object's being constituted by the matter that makes it up: a wooden doorstop, for example, is constituted by molecules of wood. This kind of constitution doesn't seem relevant to the constitution of a property by other properties; properties aren't material objects and are not literally made out of other properties. On the other hand, there is *realization*; here Brink doesn't give examples, but examples are not far to seek. Consider the property of being a doorstop: this property is multiply realizable in the sense that very different sorts of things can be (function as) a doorstop (a piece of wood, a book, a wastebasket, a lead cube, . . .). Take a particular doorstop—a wedge-shaped piece of wood, for example: we could say that here the property of being a doorstop is realized by the other properties had by that piece of wood. There will be some set(s) of properties P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n had by that piece of wood such that necessarily, anything that has those properties is a doorstop. We could then say that those properties P_1, \dots, P_n *constitute* the property of being a doorstop. Of course other sorts of things could be a doorstop: an iron, a gallon of milk, etc., so that there will be many different sets of properties meeting the above condition. Each of those sets of properties will entail the property of being a doorstop, and each will constitute that property. Further, the property of being a doorstop will entail the disjunction of all the sets of properties that realize the property of being a doorstop.

Now suppose this is how things go when naturalistic properties constitute a moral property—moral obligation, e.g.,. If so, where a given act A is morally obligatory, there will be various sets of naturalistic properties such that necessarily, if A has one of those sets of naturalistic properties, then A has the property of being morally obligatory, and the property of being morally obligatory is then constituted by that set of properties. And of course when a set of properties entails obligation, the conjunction of those properties is a conjunctive property that entails it. To argue that moral obligation is constituted by naturalistic properties, therefore, one would have to argue that there are sets of naturalistic properties that entail obligation, and hence (conjunctive) properties that entail it. The

²See below, pp. 259ff. on Frank Jackson.

³*Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), in particular pp. 156–160, 176–77, and 193–97. (Here I'm grateful to William FitzPatrick.)

disjunction of these properties, furthermore, will entail obligation, and also be entailed by it; so there will be a naturalistic property (the disjunction of those conjunctive properties) that is equivalent in the broadly logical sense to the property of obligation.

The most natural (maybe the only natural) way of arguing that naturalism can accommodate morality, therefore, is to argue for some form of EQUIVALENCE. I'll begin by showing that, by virtue of the supervenience of the moral on the nonmoral, EQUIVALENCE is in fact true. I'll go on to argue, however, that its truth doesn't so much as slyly suggest that naturalism is compatible with or can accommodate moral realism. Supervenience, so I argue, therefore presents a real problem for those who think naturalism can accommodate morality—or at any rate for those who propose to argue for that thesis. But first, what is naturalism and what is moral realism?

The latter is characterized variously, but most of the differences will make no difference for my argument. Essential to moral realism, as I'm thinking of it, is the thesis that there exist such moral properties as *being right*, *being wrong*, *being obligatory*, *being supererogatory*, and so on, and true propositions that predicate moral properties of actions: for example, *it is wrong to torture people for fun* and *one ought to care for one's aging parents*. Furthermore, many of our ordinary moral claims and assertions express such propositions. Still further, moral truths are *objective*, in the sense that they are in a certain way independent of human beliefs and desires.⁴ It is wrong to torture people for the fun of it, and would remain wrong even if most or all of the world's population came to believe that this behavior is perfectly acceptable, and indeed came to desire that it be much more widely practiced.⁵

Naturalism comes in even more flavors than moral realism; there are many varieties together forming an analogically related Thomistic (or Wittgensteinian) family. An adequate characterization of it (if there is a single 'it' there) would require a paper all its own. Some hold that naturalism is not so much as a doctrine or endorsement of a proposition, so that naturalism as such is neither true nor false; for example, Michael Rea proposes that naturalism is a research program,⁶ and Bas van Fraassen that it is a "stance."⁷ Among those who hold that naturalism is indeed a philosophical claim, the large division, perhaps, is into epistemological

⁴As John Mackie put it, moral obligation "involves a call for action or for the refraining from action, and one that is absolute, not contingent upon any desire or preference or policy or choice, his own or anyone else's," *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 33.

⁵For a fuller account of moral realism with which I am in substantial sympathy, see chapter 2 of Terence Cuneo's *The Normative Web* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). "Substantial sympathy": I'm doubtful about what Cuneo says about moral realism and independence of (human) minds.

⁶Michael Rea, "Naturalism and Moral Realism." Rea argues that one who endorses naturalism taken as a research program cannot consistently also endorse moral realism.

⁷*The Empirical Stance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

and metaphysical naturalism.⁸ The former is the view that the methods of science are paramount for inquiry; roughly speaking, science is all there is to know and the methods of science are the correct methods to employ in any inquiry.⁹ Although epistemological naturalism has serious problems, my focus here will be on metaphysical naturalism.

Of course metaphysical naturalism itself comes in several varieties. According to one variety (one with obvious connection to epistemological naturalism), the only entities that exist are those that are postulated by science. This variety suffers from an annoying (and oft-noted) defect. If we are thinking of *current* science, it seems to display a sort of temporal chauvinism: how can we be sure that future science won't postulate entities of a sort very different from those acknowledged by current science? Who knows what science 500 years from now might be like—perhaps it will endorse Leibnizian monads, or immaterial thinkers, or sentient elementary particles and panpsychism, or kinds of entities of which we currently have no conception. Why think current posits should be exalted over those that may be coming? On the other hand, if we say that it is *final* science, or science "at the end of inquiry" that is at issue, then we really aren't told much of anything; our grasp of final science and the end of inquiry is, at present, a little weak.

There is another kind of naturalism, however, that is more solid and venturesome, and it is this variety with which I'm presently concerned. According to Barry Stroud,

the first thing to do with naturalism, as with any philosophical doctrine, . . . is to ask what it is *against*. Naturalism on any reading is opposed to supernaturalism. . . . By 'supernaturalism' I mean the invocation of an agent or force which somehow stands outside the familiar natural world and so whose doings cannot be understood as part of it. Most metaphysical systems of the past included some such agent. A naturalistic conception of the world would be opposed to all of them.¹⁰

Perhaps we can focus this account by thinking of metaphysical naturalism as the view that there is no such person as God—the God of the great theistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam—or anything like

⁸Methodological naturalism is often added as a third branch; I'll include it as a variety of epistemological naturalism.

⁹Thus Wilfrid Sellars: "In the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not." "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Volume I: The Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (University of Minnesota Press, 1956), paragraph 41.

¹⁰"The Charm of Naturalism," presidential address to the Pacific division of the APA, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 70.2 (Nov. 1996), p. 44. By the end of the talk, however, naturalism seems to have lost a bit of its punch: "What I am calling open-minded or expansive naturalism says we must accept everything we find ourselves committed to in accounting for everything we agree is so and want to explain" (p. 54). The supernaturalist (the theist, for example) will be happy to embrace naturalism thus construed (although not everyone will be happy to embrace what the theist finds herself committed to).

God. There is no all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good creator of the universe; furthermore, there are no beings much like him—no angels or demons, nothing of the sort we ordinarily think of as supernatural. This specification of naturalism suffers from vagueness (does it exclude immaterial selves or souls? Tillichian grounds of being?), but it will have to suffice for present purposes. Naturalism obviously entails atheism; it is stronger than atheism, however, in that there are varieties of atheism—classical Platonism and Stoicism, for example, and perhaps the idealism of the young Hegel—it excludes. Henceforth I'll use 'naturalism' to denote this variety of metaphysical naturalism, though what I say will be applicable in various degrees to other sorts of naturalism, epistemological, metaphysical, and nonpropositional.

Now many have thought naturalism has a real problem with ethics—in particular, it seems to preclude moral realism. Theists often think moral obligation is intimately connected with God's will or his commands;¹¹ hence (say some theists) the serious naturalist cannot consistently think there is any such thing as moral obligation. Many naturalists concur. According to John Mackie, it would be strange, queer, weird (given naturalism), if there were such a thing as genuine and objective moral value. It would be queer if some actions had this property of being just plain wrong, where this wasn't definable or analyzable in terms of such naturalistic properties as what people like, or want, or desire, or naturalistic conditions of human beings having to do with pleasure, length and quality (another value term) of life, and the like. As Mackie puts it, "If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe."¹² The thought is that moral obligation doesn't fit at all well with naturalism; naturalism cannot accommodate obligation; if naturalism were true, so the thought goes, there wouldn't be any such thing as objective moral obligation.

Some naturalists, on the other hand, have disputed this conclusion, for example the "Cornell realists," who, starting in the 1980s, have maintained

¹¹For representative current versions of theistic ethics, see, e.g., Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); William Mann, "Theism and the Foundations of Ethics," in *The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William Mann (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); and Philip Quinn, "Divine Command Theory," in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000).

¹²*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 38. One might be pardoned for questioning the strength of an argument from queerness. The argument form

It would be really weird if things were such and such

Therefore

Things aren't such and such

seems initially a bit dubious. Perhaps the real force of the argument is just that it is a way of repeating and elaborating the intuitive inclination to think that objective moral value doesn't fit with naturalism.

that naturalism can perfectly well accommodate the existence and exemplification of specifically moral properties, including moral obligation. What I want to investigate is this question: is it true that naturalism, taken as above, can accommodate morality?

Put this way, the first thing to see is that this question needs a little sharpening. What, exactly, or even approximately, is this 'accommodating'? We might begin by returning to the question I raised above: is

- (1) If naturalism were true there would be no such thing as moral obligation—that is, no actions would possess the property of being morally obligatory¹³

true? Here we immediately run into serious problems having to do with the modal status of theism and naturalism. Suppose we begin by thinking of theism as *classical* theism. This includes the claim that God is a necessarily existent being, one who exists in all possible worlds. What naturalism asserts, then, is that there is no such person as God (as classically thought of) and nothing like God. Naturalism is therefore the conjunction of two propositions:

- (2) There is no such person as God,

and

- (3) There are no beings distinct from but like God.

(2), given classical theism and given the usual S_5 -like ways of thinking about modality, is noncontingent: necessarily true or necessarily false. (3), however, is contingent: there are possible worlds in which it is true (worlds in which, for example, there are immaterial souls or angels) and worlds in which it is false. So is naturalism contingent or noncontingent? If (classical) theism is true, naturalism is necessarily false. But if theism is false, the first conjunct of naturalism is necessarily true and the second contingent (contingently true or contingently false).

A theist, therefore, ought to think that (1) has a necessarily false antecedent, and hence, given the standard way of thinking about entailment, is true and indeed necessarily true. That isn't of much interest, however, because (from the theistic perspective)

- (4) If naturalism is true, there *is* such a thing as moral obligation

is also necessarily true, and for the same reason.

Similar problems arise with the consequent of (1). Transposing (1), we get

- (1*) If there is such a thing as moral obligation, then naturalism is false.

¹³Where a special case of the consequent would be there being no such property as moral obligation.

A theist, however, will be very likely to think that it is necessary that there be such a thing as moral obligation;¹⁴ hence both the antecedent and consequent of (1*) are true; hence each entails the other, but with little apparent relevance to the question whether naturalism can accommodate moral obligation. This way of thinking about our question—can naturalism accommodate moral obligation?—runs into a thicket of difficulties, difficulties arising from the noncontingent nature of theism, and perhaps also the noncontingent nature of propositions involving the existence of moral obligation. Such difficulties are familiar, certainly; but that doesn't make them any more tractable. This isn't the place to try to figure out how to reason about noncontingent propositions of this sort; that would require more than a whole paper on its own account. What is clear, however, is that addressing our question by way of asking after the truth of (1) does not promise to be fruitful. Let's try a different approach.

II. The Question

Consider another area where we might raise a similar question. We might wonder whether naturalism can accommodate *proper function* and allied properties such as health, disease, dysfunction, function *simpliciter*, and, so I say, rationality and warrant.¹⁵ Some naturalists are convinced that these properties have no place in a properly naturalistic world picture; other naturalists disagree, holding that these properties fit perfectly well with naturalism. One way to enter the question is to ask whether the property *functions properly* can be, as they say, explained in naturalistic terms. We can expand this question as follows. Some properties are clearly naturalistically acceptable, in something like the sense that their exemplifications don't imply the existence of entities naturalists are not prepared to countenance. We may be unable to say more precisely what constitutes naturalistic acceptability; perhaps we shall have to give some examples and hope for the best. Examples would be properties that show up in current physical science, such as, (*having*) *mass, such and such a spin, such and such a velocity and location, such and such a charge* and so on. Other examples would come from the life sciences: (*being*) *a genome, fitness enhancing, a prokaryote, a phenotype*, and so on. But presumably many properties that don't show up in physical and biological science will also be naturalistically acceptable (henceforth 'naturalistic'): for example, *being an action of promise keeping, causing someone injury*,¹⁶ *helping one's aging parents* and *maximizing the world's hedonic index*. Others are clearly not naturalistic (but, we could say,

¹⁴Well, perhaps not quite. Many theists think obligation depends upon divine commands, or divine willings. But suppose there had been no created rational agents; would there still have been those divine commands or volitions? Perhaps not; so perhaps what is necessary is that if there are rational agents, there is such a thing as moral obligation.

¹⁵*Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), chap. 11 "Naturalism vs. Proper Function?"

¹⁶Perhaps you think *injury* belongs in the same category as proper function and health, and is therefore not obviously naturalistic. If so, substitute some such property as *breaking someone's leg, causing someone to contract lung cancer*, etc.

'supernatural'): for example *being an angel, being hated by a demon, being created by God* and so on.

How would one show or argue that naturalism can accommodate proper function? A plausible way, perhaps the most plausible way, would be to find a clearly naturalistic property P such that *proper function* is equivalent in the broadly logical sense to P , i.e., such that

- (5) For any object x , x functions properly if and only if x has P

is metaphysically necessary. We'll assume that P can be complex, and that naturalistic propertyhood is closed under (infinite) conjunction and disjunction: if A and B are naturalistic properties, so is their conjunction and their disjunction (though not necessarily their complements). A way to show that proper function is naturalistic, then, is to find some necessarily true proposition of the form displayed by (5), where P is naturalistic. I've argued elsewhere that the various attempts to find such a proposition have so far come to grief, and that prospects for success along these lines are bleak.¹⁷

Now we might ask whether the same procedure can be followed with respect to moral properties, for example, moral obligation. Could it be shown that obligation is naturalistic by finding a necessarily true proposition of the form

- (6) An action x is morally obligatory if and only if x has P

where P is naturalistic? For example,

- (7) Necessarily, an action x is morally obligatory if and only if x contributes to the greatest happiness of the greatest number?

Can we show that moral obligation is naturalistic by finding some naturalistic property to which it is equivalent?

Before addressing this question, we need a couple of qualifications. First, there is the familiar distinction between *prima facie* obligation and all-things-considered obligation. Any act of promise-keeping is *prima facie* obligatory, but circumstances have to be right for it to be all-things-considered obligatory. For example (to take a page from Plato), you have borrowed my AK 47 assault rifle, promising to return it today. Yesterday you learned that I am intending to use it to shoot up the philosophy department, which by my lights has taken insufficient note of my merits. I demand the return of my weapon; but you are not obligated to return it. An act, then, is *prima facie* obligatory in virtue of being an act of promise-keeping; it is all-things-considered obligatory in virtue of being an act of promise-keeping in the right circumstances. To keep things simple, let's think just about *prima facie* obligation; all-things-considered obligation will presumably be something like a vector sum of *prima facie* obligations. We are therefore asking whether

¹⁷See my *Warrant and Proper Function*, chap. 11, and (with Michael Tooley) *Knowledge of God* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 20ff.

one can show that naturalism can accommodate *prima facie* obligation by showing that there is a naturalistic property equivalent to *prima facie* obligation. (Henceforth I'll take 'obligation' to mean '*prima facie* obligation.')

And second, set aside actions the performance of which obviously¹⁸ entails the existence of supernatural beings—for example, the actions of obeying divine commands, refusing to make Faustian bargains with Satan, telling the truth to an angel, and the like. Naturalists will think such actions can't be done and hence are not obligatory. Theists will think some of these actions are indeed obligatory, but in the present dialectical context it would be inappropriate to expect the naturalist to try to show that such obligations can be accommodated by naturalism. We should therefore restrict our attention to actions the performance of which does not obviously entail the existence of supernatural beings—'natural actions,' as we might call them.

III. Supervenience

Thus fortified, we can return to our question: can one show that moral obligation (qualified as above) is naturalistic by finding some naturalistic property to which it is equivalent? One might be pardoned for thinking so; if one did, however, one would be mistaken. The reason has to do with the fact that moral properties *supervene* on nonmoral properties: you can't have a moral difference without having a nonmoral difference. Thus, for example, it's not possible that there be two (natural) actions which have the same nonmoral or descriptive properties, but one of which is morally obligatory and the other is not. Recognition of the supervenience of moral on descriptive or nonmoral properties goes back at least to G. E. Moore.¹⁹ Now some descriptive properties are not naturalistic (*being created by God, being an angel*, for example); but presumably moral properties supervene on properties that are naturalistic as well as descriptive. For example, it couldn't be that (natural) acts *A* and *B* differ with respect to *being obligatory* but coincide on their naturalistic properties; it couldn't be that *A* and *B* differ with respect to being obligatory but are both acts of promise keeping (and also coincide on their other relevant naturalistic properties). What I propose to argue is the following: the fact that moral properties supervene on naturalistic properties means that finding a naturalistic property logically equivalent to a moral property *M* (obligation, for example) is nowhere nearly sufficient to show that *M* is natural.

In order to state the argument, we must take a brief look at some of the properties of supervenience.²⁰ The supervenience relation is usually

¹⁸"Obviously": if God is a necessary being (and construing *entailment* the usual way) every proposition entails that there is such a person as God.

¹⁹*Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge, 1922), p. 263. We might make heavy weather over the distinction between moral and descriptive properties (is the disjunction/conjunction of a moral with a descriptive property moral, or descriptive, or both, or neither?) but let's confine our attention to moral obligation, and let's initially suppose that we know, roughly at least, what descriptive properties are.

²⁰See the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (online) article on supervenience; and Jaegwon Kim, "Supervenience as a Philosophical Concept," *Metaphilosophy* 21 (1990).

thought of as a relation between sets or kinds of properties: many believe, for example, that mental properties supervene on physical properties. Our present concern is with the thought that moral properties, in particular moral obligation, the property of being morally obligatory, supervene on naturalistic properties. Putting the basic idea of supervenience a bit more precisely, we can say

- (8) Properties of kind P supervene on properties of kind P^* just if necessarily, for any objects x and y , if x and y differ with respect to properties of kind P , they also differ with respect to properties of kind P^* .

We'll be concerned with moral obligation; so the special case in which we are interested would be

- (9) Obligation supervenes on naturalistic properties if and only if necessarily, if (natural) acts A and B differ with respect to being obligatory, they also differ with respect to naturalistic properties

or

- (10) Obligation supervenes on naturalistic properties if and only if necessarily, if (natural) acts A and B coincide on their naturalistic properties, then they also coincide with respect to being obligatory.

(9) and (10) aren't quite right; as they stand the right hand parts of the biconditionals are trivially true. That is because acts A and B *can't* coincide on *all* their naturalistic properties and still be distinct acts; one of A 's naturalistic properties, for example, will be the property of being identical with A . Again, it would take us too far afield to try to state them more exactly, and in any event it's doubtful that the gain in precision would outweigh the resultant pedantry.

There are several varieties of supervenience: global (which itself comes in more than one variety), local, regional, weak, strong and still others; for our purposes it is the distinction between weak and strong supervenience that is of most interest. Note first that supervenience claims can be put by way of quantification over possible worlds; we can state (9), for example, as

- (9*) Obligation supervenes on naturalistic properties if and only if for any possible world w , if acts A and B differ with respect to being obligatory in w , they also differ with respect to their naturalistic properties in w .

(9*) would be a specification of weak supervenience, which we could put more generally as

- (11) Properties of kind A *weakly* supervene on properties of kind B just if for any possible worlds w and any objects x and y , if x and

y coincide on their B properties in w , then they also coincide on their A properties in w .

Strong supervenience, on the other hand, goes as follows:

- (12) Properties of kind A *strongly* supervene on properties of kind B just if for any possible worlds w and w^* and any objects x and y in w and w^* , if x in w coincides on properties of kind B with y in w^* , then x in w coincides on properties of kind A with y in w^* .

We can see the difference between strong and weak supervenience as follows. Say that x 's *weight* is given by how much x weighs. John and George coincide on their weight in w (the actual world, let's say): each weighs 190 lbs in w . Then they also coincide on the property *weighing more than Sam* in w —either they both have it, in w , or they both lack it there. Hence *weighing more than Sam* weakly supervenes on weight. But *weighing more than Sam* does not *strongly* supervene on weight: perhaps John in w^{21} weighs the same as George in w^* , but John weighs more than Sam in w and George weighs less than Sam in w^* : that could be the case if Sam weighs more in w^* than in w . Therefore *weighing more than Sam* supervenes weakly but not strongly on weight. The property *believes truly that Sam is ill-tempered* weakly supervenes on the property *believes that Sam is ill-tempered*: let ' P ' name the proposition *Sam is ill-tempered*; then if in w S and S^* coincide on *believes P* , they also coincide in w on *believes P truly*. But *believes truly that Sam is ill-tempered* does not strongly supervene on *believes that Sam is ill-tempered*. For suppose P is true in w but not in w^* , and suppose in w and w^* , respectively, S and S^* , respectively, believe P . Then S in w does not coincide with S^* in w^* on the property *believes P truly*; S has that property in w while S^* lacks it in w^* .

As is only proper, therefore, weak supervenience does not in general entail strong supervenience. But which kind of supervenience—weak or strong—characterizes the relationship between descriptive and moral properties? Pretty clearly it's strong supervenience. We can see this as follows. A natural act that is obligatory will be obligatory in virtue of exemplifying some naturalistic property—for example, *being an act of promise-keeping*, *being an act of refraining from stealing*, *being an act of helping one's aging parents*, and the like; and it's necessary that an act that has one of these properties is obligatory. Furthermore, a natural act is not obligatory unless there is some naturalistic property in virtue of which it is obligatory. So consider the set M of naturalistic properties in virtue of which a natural act is obligatory. Clearly the property *being obligatory and being a*

²¹John in w has P , of course, is a variant of 'John has P in w ', i.e., 'Necessarily, John is such that if w were actual, John would have P '. If we want to insist that 'John in w ' and 'John in w^* ' are denoting terms, they denote the same thing, namely John. To avoid the misunderstanding in some dogging expressions like 'John in w has P ' we could put (12) as follows:

(12*) Properties of kind A *strongly* supervene on properties of kind B just if for any possible worlds w and w^* and any objects x and y in w and w^* , if x has the same B properties in w as y has in w^* , then x has the same A properties in w as y has in w^* .

naturalistic property strongly supervenes on M. For suppose acts *A* in *w* and *B* in *w** coincide on M properties. *A* in *w* will have a set of M properties; that set of M properties will entail either that *A* is obligatory or that it is not. But *B* in *w** has the same set of M properties; this set of M properties will entail that *B* is obligatory in *w** just if it entails that *A* is obligatory in *w*; hence *A* in *w* coincides on obligation with *B* in *w**.

Obligation, therefore, strongly supervenes on naturalistic properties. It follows furthermore that there are naturalistic properties that are logically equivalent to obligation. We can see this as follows. Any property in M (any property in virtue of which an act is obligatory) entails obligation; hence the disjunction $M_1 \vee M_2 \vee \dots \vee M_n$ entails O. But since an act is O only if there is a naturalistic property in virtue of which it is O, if an act *A* is O, it has some property in M; hence O also entails $M_1 \vee M_2 \vee \dots \vee M_n$. Hence there is a naturalistic property N that is equivalent in the broadly logical sense to the property of being obligatory.

IV. The Question Again

We are now prepared to answer the question with which we started: can one show that moral obligation is naturalistic by finding some naturalistic property to which it is (metaphysically, broadly logically) equivalent? Clearly not. For suppose moral obligation is as naturalistically unacceptable as you please. Suppose, for example, that some version of divine command ethics is correct: what makes an action (*prima facie*) obligatory is the property of being commanded or enjoined by God.²² More exactly (since God could issue commands addressed only to some persons) what makes an action obligatory is God's commanding all persons to perform it. Still more exactly, what makes an action obligatory is that it is an essential property of God to command all persons to perform it, i.e.,

- (13) What makes an action *A* obligatory is that it is an essential property of God to command all persons²³ to perform *A*.

What makes an action *prima facie* obligatory, then, would be a property that obviously entails that there is such a person as God; moral obligation, therefore, would presumably be naturalistically unacceptable *in excelsis*. Even so, however, it would still be the case, by the above argument, that there is a descriptive property equivalent to obligation. And that property might be naturalistic as well as descriptive. For suppose, as theists typically think, God is a necessary being and it is an essential property of God to command persons to tell the truth, and to refrain from murder, theft, adultery and covetousness; more generally, suppose it is essential to God to command persons to treat others with love and respect. These properties

²²Or, more modestly, suppose that necessarily, an action is obligatory only if God approves its performance.

²³More precisely, it is an essential property of God to issue this command to all persons if there are persons (creatures with moral status). This slightly complicates but doesn't compromise the argument.

and their complements are naturalistic; hence under these conditions there will be a naturalistic property equivalent to moral obligation, despite the fact that what makes an action morally obligatory obviously entails that there is such a person as God. Hence finding a naturalistic property that is logically equivalent to obligation doesn't show for a moment that obligation is itself naturalistic. To show that obligation is naturalistic, one must find a naturalistic property that is much more tightly connected with obligation; mere equivalence isn't sufficient.

V. Sparsism to the Rescue?

Of course this argument depends on the supposition that there are equivalent but distinct properties. Frank Jackson rejects this assumption in proposing what he calls the "location problem" for ethics.²⁴ He points, first, to the supervenience of moral on descriptive properties, arguing (a little casually) that for any moral property *M*, there is an equivalent descriptive property *D*. But Jackson holds that there are no metaphysically equivalent but distinct properties; he therefore holds that *M* is *identical* with *D*. He then concludes that *M* is really a descriptive property.²⁵ Following David Lewis (but at a bit of a distance), call this thought—the thought that if a property *A* is equivalent to a property *B*, then *A* is identical with *B*—the *sparse* view of properties and its alternative the *abundant* view. "At a bit of a distance:" Lewis thought of sparse properties as those that are in some way fundamental to the physical universe, the properties, perhaps, that would figure in a completed physics; I take the sparse view of properties to be simply the idea that there are no distinct but equivalent properties. Among sparse properties, therefore, there will be the properties involved in completed physics, but also such properties as *being human*, *keeping a promise*, *being obligatory*, and so on.

Now there is much to deplore about the sparse view of propertyhood. It implies that the property of being the square root of 9 is the very same property as that of being the fifth root of 243—despite the fact that many believe that the number 3 is the square root of 9 but fail to believe (perhaps because of inattentiveness in high school) that the number three is the fifth root of 243. This conception of properties implies a corresponding sparse conception of propositions. According to the sparse view of propositions, there is only one true mathematical proposition, which, as it happens, is also identical with the one true proposition of first-order logic (not to mention the true proposition of modal logic), which is also identical with the one true metaphysical proposition, and also with (as the theist sees it) the proposition that there is such a person as God, or (as the atheist sees it) the proposition that there is no such person. This is not easy to believe, even after much practice.

²⁴From *Metaphysics to Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 125ff.

²⁵Couldn't he just as well conclude that *D* is really a moral property? Presumably so; perhaps the right conclusion from Jackson's perspective is that *M* (or *D*) is both moral and descriptive.

Abundantists, on the other hand, will think that there are metaphysically equivalent but distinct propositions. The proposition *there is a smallest prime* is equivalent either to *there is such a person as God*, or *it's false that there is such a person as God*; nevertheless it is distinct from each of them. This is not the place to embark on an abundantist theory of properties,²⁶ but abundantists will often tie propositional identity and distinctness to possibility of belief. Thus, if it is possible to believe that there is a smallest prime without believing that there is such a person as God—i.e., if the propositions *there is a smallest prime* and *there is such a person as God* are such that it is possible to believe the first but fail to believe the second—then (by Leibniz's Law) the proposition *there is a smallest prime* is distinct from the proposition *there is such a person as God*. More generally, where 'S and S*' are sentential letters, if it is possible to believe that S but fail to believe that S*, then the proposition that S is distinct from the proposition that S*. (Of course abundantism, the thought that there are distinct but equivalent properties and propositions, does not depend on this particular way of arguing for the distinctness of these propositions.) The abundantist will hold that there is a similar sufficient condition for distinctness with respect to properties; for example, if it is possible to believe that 2 is the successor of 1 without believing that 2 is the smallest prime, then the properties *being the successor of 1* and *being the smallest prime* are distinct, but equivalent in the metaphysical or broadly logical sense.²⁷

You might think the difference between abundantists and sparsists is of little consequence. You might think, if you go with the abundant view, that those who accept the sparse view really use 'property' to refer to equivalence classes of properties; if you go with the sparse view, you might think those who accept abundance really use 'property' to denote pairs of properties with something else—'representations'²⁸ of some kind, perhaps. More likely, you might think that sparsists and abundantists don't actually differ with respect to the *meaning* they attach to 'property,' but hold different *theories* about what properties are like and how many of them there are. You might go on to add that the difference between these theories is relatively insignificant, since each theory can model the other:

²⁶One with which I have considerable sympathy is presented in Peter van Inwagen's "A Theory of Properties," in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, vol. 1, ed. Dean Zimmerman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

²⁷Here appeal may be made to Kripke: hasn't he taught us that water is H₂O, and indeed that it is necessary that water is H₂O? The abundantist is committed to thinking that the property of being water (the property expressed by 'is water') is distinct from the property of being H₂O. Clearly many, e.g., our ancestors, have grasped the first but not the second. She can agree, however, that it is necessary that water is H₂O: Necessarily, every sample of water is a sample of H₂O. She can agree with Kripke that we are inclined to think, perhaps under the baneful influence of mistaken views about the function of kind terms, that 'water' expresses such properties as *being clear, odorless, tasteless, and filling the lakes and streams*; she can add that what Kripke gets us to see, if he's right, is that 'water' does not express those properties, but is instead a rigid designator of the stuff that actually has those properties. As I would put it, 'water' expresses the (or an) essence of that stuff.

²⁸See a page or so below.

sparsists can model abundantism in properties and representations, and abundantists can model sparsism in equivalence classes of properties.²⁹

The fact is, however, that there is ordinarily a significant difference between sparsists and abundantists: they differ with respect to our grasp of or epistemic access to properties. On the abundant conception, one thinks we have a direct grasp or apprehension of some properties—such properties as *being triangular*, *being equiangular*, *being an elephant*, *being taller than Sam*, and so on, as well as of such properties as *being right*, or *obligatory*, or *permissible*. Of course there are other properties of which we don't or may not have a direct grasp. Suppose I know little about quantum mechanics; I do know, however, that there is a property had by electrons that physicists refer to as 'spin,' but that's about all I know in this neighborhood. Then I have at best an indirect grasp of this property. It can also happen that I have a grasp of a certain property, but fail to have a grasp of properties equivalent to it; thus I may have a grasp of the property *being half of six* but, due to my lamentable ignorance, fail to have a grasp of the property *being the 5th root of 243*.

On the sparse conception, however, things are different. There is the property *being the 5th root of 243*; that is the same property as *being half of six*, and *being* $\frac{1}{3} \int_0^3 x \, dx$. Hence if I have a grasp of the one, I also have a grasp of the other two, they being the same property. But how can I have a grasp of being $\frac{1}{3} \int_0^3 x \, dx$ if I have never so much as heard of definite integrals? Here sparsists often appeal to *representations*. Thus Jackson:

Cases where we think that a triangle is equiangular while failing to think that it is equilateral are ones where we have a separation in modes of representation in thought for what is, all the same, one and the same property in our sense of 'property'. We have two ways of singling out or representing to ourselves what is one and the same potential feature of reality.³⁰

The property *being half of six* is the same property as being $\frac{1}{3} \int_0^3 dx$; it's just that we have two different representations of it, one connected, somehow, with the phrase 'being half of six' and the other with 'being $\frac{1}{3} \int_0^3 dx$ '. But what are these "representations"? Presumably they are not those very phrases or any other linguistic items; but then what are they? It *sounds* as if they are like what is expressed by definite descriptions ("two ways of singling out . . . what is one and the same potential feature of reality"), so that the case in question would be like that where we single out or represent to ourselves the number three by the descriptions *the second smallest prime* and *the cube root of 27*. Now here what we do is single out the number three by means of properties unique to it—*being the second smallest prime* and *being the cube root of 27*. But the sparsist's representations of properties can't themselves, presumably, be *other* properties; for of course the same problem would arise about *them*. We would no more

²⁹Of course abundantists won't think that these equivalence classes really *are* properties; unlike properties, they have members, and are not *had by* anything.

³⁰*From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 126.

have a direct grasp of *those* properties than we do of the property *being half of six*; for them, as for *being half of six*, we would require representations, which would themselves be properties requiring representations, and so on. But if these representations aren't themselves properties, what are they?

We may safely leave this problem to the sparsists. But surely sparsism will help with the project of showing that moral obligation is naturalistic? Moral obligation supervenes on naturalistic properties: hence there is a naturalistic property equivalent to it; hence by sparsism, obligation is identical with that naturalistic property; hence obligation is itself naturalistic. Sadly enough, given sparsism, things aren't nearly that simple. True, by supervenience there is an apparently naturalistic property *N* equivalent to and hence, by sparsism, identical with moral obligation. But suppose divine command ethics is correct, in the version outlined above. Then what makes an action obligatory is its being an essential property of God to command all persons to perform that action. If so, obligation is also equivalent to and hence by sparsism identical with *being such that it is an essential property of God to command all persons to perform it*. Hence it could be that obligation = *N* = *being such that it is an essential property of God to command all persons to perform it*.

By way of example: suppose the property *maximizes the world's hedonic index* is proposed as the naturalistic property equivalent to obligation. Perhaps this property is indeed equivalent to and hence (by sparsism) identical with moral obligation. But perhaps it is also equivalent to and hence identical with the property *being such that it is an essential property of God to command all persons to perform it*. For perhaps the basic divine command issued to all persons is *thou shalt maximize the world's hedonic index*. If these things are correct, then *maximizes the world's hedonic index* is identical with obligation and with *being such that it is an essential property of God to command all persons to perform it*. Given sparsism, therefore, the fact that there is an apparently naturalistic property identical with obligation is quite compatible, epistemically speaking, with its also being the case that moral obligation is identical with the property *being such that it is an essential property of God to command all persons to perform it*. Hence finding an apparently naturalistic property *N* equivalent to obligation fails to show, given sparsism, that obligation is naturalistic. Indeed, given sparsism it is epistemically possible that the apparently naturalistic property in question—*maximizes the world's hedonic index*, for example—is identical with the property of *being such that it is an essential property of God to command all persons to perform it* and hence not naturalistic after all. As I say, sparsism makes things really difficult.³¹

³¹If, for all we can tell, the property *maximizes the world's hedonic index* just is the property *being such that it is an essential property of God to command all persons to perform it*, doesn't it seem that, on sparsism, our grasp of or access to properties is pretty minimal? Wouldn't it be better to jettison them in favor of those representations whatever exactly they are?

VI. Brief Illustrative Interlude

So far I've argued that the existence of a naturalistic property *P* equivalent to moral obligation utterly fails to show that obligation is itself natural—and this on both the sparsist and the abundantist conception of properties. I'd like to illustrate this state of affairs by examining a couple of attempts to provide a naturalistic account of morality.

VI.A.

First, Peter Railton's "Moral Realism."³² Perhaps Railton isn't aiming precisely to show that naturalism can accommodate moral realism; it may be that his project here is closer to that of providing a "reforming definition" of moral terms, where the reforming definition preserves, if not necessarily all, at least a significant part of common sense morality.³³ What I propose to do, however, is to see how Railton's proposals fare, considered as an attempt to show that naturalism can accommodate morality by finding naturalistic properties equivalent to moral properties. Let me repeat: this is probably not how Railton takes his project; but that's no reason not to consider how his proposal fares regarded as such an attempt.

Now Railton means to defend moral realism from a naturalistic perspective; in particular, he argues that a particular naturalistic property is identical with or equivalent to moral rightness. He begins by outlining the notion of *objectified subjective interest*. Your *subjective* interest is the set of your wants or desires, whether conscious or unconscious. Among your subjective interests, therefore, might be the desires to get rich, to climb at the 5.11 level, to worship God more effectively, and to purchase a Lamborghini. Of course some of these may be *ignorant* desires, in the sense that if you knew more you would no longer have the desire in question. For example, perhaps you think a Lamborghini costs \$27,000; if you knew that it really costs \$270,000, you'd no longer want to purchase one. Your *objectified* subjective interest lies in the near neighborhood of what *would be* your subjective interest if you weren't hampered by ignorance of the relevant facts. Suppose you are in fact epistemically limited in way *W*: a state of affairs *S* is part of your objectified subjective interest just if, if you were epistemically unlimited, then you would desire that if you were epistemically limited in way *W*, you would want *S*.

How is this connected with morality? "We thus may say that moral norms reflect a certain kind of rationality, rationality not from the point of view of any particular individual, but from what might be called a social point of view" (p. 190). "I have spoken of what is morally best as a matter of what is instrumentally rational from a social point of view" (p. 200).

³²The *Philosophical Review* XCV, No. 2 (April 1986), pp. 163ff. Page references to Railton's work are to this article.

³³See Railton's "Naturalism and Prescriptivity," *Social Philosophy and Public Policy* 7.1, pp. 158ff.

What is morally right, therefore, is what is rational—instrumentally rational—from a social point of view.

How are we to understand “instrumentally rational from a *social* point of view”? Railton is a little short on details here. Social rationality, it seems, is close to “what would be rationally approved of were the interests of all potentially affected individuals counted equally under circumstances of full and vivid information” (p. 190). This point of view, therefore, involves judgments that are *impartial* in that they don’t favor the interests of some persons as opposed to those of others; these judgments are also *comprehensive*, in the sense that they concern the interests of all people potentially affected by the action contemplated. (The interests of the rich, or intelligent, or well-connected don’t count for any more than those of the poor, dimwitted, or ill-connected.) We can therefore speak of something like a *social interest*, or an interest of society. And this social interest will be some function of the individual (objective) interests of the members of that society—a function that impartially takes into account everyone’s interests. We can put the account schematically as follows:

- (R) Act *A* is morally right for *S* if and only if *S*’s doing *A* appropriately advances the social interest—i.e., the interest of *S*’s society.

There are traditional problems for views like this, but I won’t go into them here; our present interest is in the question whether a procedure like Railton’s can show that moral realism is consistent with naturalism, that naturalism can accommodate moral realism. According to Railton’s (R), the property of being morally right, the property an action has if it is morally right, is equivalent to the property of appropriately advancing the social interest: call this property ‘P’. P, we may suppose, is, at least as far as initial appearances go, naturalistically acceptable (we need not make heavy weather over ‘appropriately’). As we have seen, given the strong supervenience of moral properties on naturalistic properties, for any moral property, there is a naturalistic property equivalent to it; perhaps Railton thinks of P as the (or a) naturalistic property equivalent to rightness.

Now the first question is whether Railton takes P to be equivalent to rightness but *distinct* from it, or whether he takes it to be *identical* with rightness. According to Jackson, “Cornell realists” take it that “ethical properties are identical with descriptive properties” (Jackson, p. 144); if he’s right, perhaps Railton holds that P is identical with rightness. The next question is whether Railton embraces abundantism or sparsism.

From an abundantist perspective, this property P is certainly not the *same* property as *being right*: it is certainly possible to believe that an action is right without believing that it has P. For example, I believe that helping one’s aged parents is right, but I have no idea whether or not helping one’s aged parents has P. It could sensibly be held that rightness and P are necessarily coextensive, that necessarily, an act is right if and only if it has P; I believe this isn’t so; but one could sensibly hold it. Given abundantism, however, one can’t sensibly hold that rightness just *is* P.

Suppose, then, that sparsism is true. That means, of course, that rightness is indeed identical with P. As we've seen, however, this, even if true, doesn't at all show that rightness is naturalistically acceptable. Rightness supervenes on naturalistic properties; therefore there is a naturalistic property that is equivalent to rightness; given sparsism, that property just is rightness; and perhaps we can understand Railton as holding that this property is P. But it is compatible with all this (given sparsism) that rightness is also identical with the property of being such that it is an essential property of God to command all persons to perform it; for it is compatible with this that *being such that it is an essential property of God to command all persons to perform it* is also equivalent to P, and hence (on sparsism) identical with P. If so, rightness would be identical with a naturalistic property, all right, but it would also be identical with a property obviously entailing that there is such a person as God—i.e., a property such that its being instantiated obviously entails that there is such a person as God—in which case it can hardly be naturalistically acceptable.

Railton's procedure, therefore, fails to show that rightness is naturalistically acceptable. Suppose sparsism is true: then perhaps he succeeds in showing that rightness is identical with P. But that is compatible with rightness also being identical with the property *being enjoined by God*, in which case rightness isn't naturalistically acceptable. Suppose, on the other hand, that abundantism is true. Then *being right* is clearly not identical with P. Is it equivalent to P? Even if Railton succeeds in showing that *being right* is equivalent to P, he fails to show that rightness is natural, for it might be that rightness is equivalent to P, but also equivalent to a property that obviously entails that there is such a person as God.

Given abundantism, therefore, one can't show that rightness or moral obligation is naturalistic by showing that it is equivalent to a naturalistic property. Indeed, perhaps the only way to show that obligation is naturalistic is to find a naturalistic property that is *identical* with it. But I can't conceal my opinion that (given abundantism) no naturalistic property is identical with obligation. For surely, for any naturalistic property P^* , it is possible to believe, of an action A, that it has P^* while failing to believe, of A, that it is obligatory, and conversely. According to G. E. Moore's open question argument one can always sensibly ask, with respect to any proposed *analysans* A of goodness, "But is A really good?" It's far from clear that this shows goodness to be unanalyzable; a correct analysis doesn't have to be *obviously* correct. A correct analysis has to supply necessary and sufficient conditions that are also informative; perhaps there are other conditions that must be met as well; *being obviously correct*, however, is not among them. On the other hand, if the question isn't whether A is a correct *analysis* of B, but whether A is *the very same property as B*, then the fact that one can believe, of x, that it has A without believing, of x, that it has B (as would presumably be the case if one could sensibly ask whether B is really A) shows that A and B are not identical.

So if abundantism is true, one can't show that obligation is naturalistic by exhibiting a naturalistic property with which one argues that it is identical. Neither, if abundantism is true, can one argue that obligation is naturalistically acceptable by finding a naturalistic property that is equivalent to it. But what other possibility is there? It looks as if, if abundantism is true, there is no way to argue cogently that obligation is naturalistically acceptable. On the other hand, if sparsism is true, then not even showing that obligation is *identical* with some naturalistic property will suffice to show that obligation is naturalistically acceptable; for obligation might well be identical with a naturalistic property, but also identical with a property obviously entailing that there is such a person as God. It therefore looks as if there is no way at all of cogently arguing that naturalism can accommodate moral obligation. A naturalist could perhaps propose some naturalistic property as a sort of surrogate for obligation,³⁴ but of course that is not to show that naturalism can accommodate obligation itself.

VI.B.

Second, Ralph Wedgwood's extremely interesting *The Nature of Normativity*.³⁵ Wedgwood argues that naturalism can accommodate normativity taken more generally—not just morality or obligation. Of course obligation and morality are central to normativity; showing that naturalism can accommodate normativity, in his general sense, is sufficient for showing that it can accommodate moral obligation. His way of arguing for this conclusion is not precisely that of arguing that there is a naturalistic property equivalent to moral obligation, but it is closely related to that procedure.³⁶

Wedgwood begins by pointing out that normative properties and relations are not natural properties, and moral facts are not natural facts. (Here I think he uses the term 'natural' the way I've been using 'naturalistic': i.e., natural facts and properties are naturalistically acceptable facts and properties.) Furthermore, he says, normative facts and properties are "irreducible" to natural facts and properties. Nevertheless, normative properties are "consonant with" naturalism, which, I take it, is to say that naturalism can accommodate normative properties:

Since normative properties are irreducible, reductive forms of naturalism must be rejected. Nonetheless, I argue that this metaphysical conception of the normative is entirely consonant with a broader version of naturalism—specifically with the idea that normative facts both supervene on, and are realized in, purely natural facts. (p. 135)

What is this realization—what is it for normative facts to be realized in purely natural facts? Consider obligation: what would it be for facts involving obligation—for example, that one is obliged to refrain from stealing—

³⁴Which is perhaps what Railton does.

³⁵Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.

³⁶If his argument is successful, it follows that there is a naturalistic property equivalent, in the broadly logical sense, to moral obligation.

to be realized in purely natural facts? As far as I can tell, Wedgwood doesn't really say what it is for *facts* of one kind or another to be realized in purely natural facts; he does say, however, what it is for *properties* to be realized in purely natural properties. His account (pp. 151–152) goes like this:

(Realization) A normative property P is realized in natural properties iff (1) P strongly supervenes on natural properties, and (2) it is an essential feature of P thus to supervene, and (3) there is a non-disjunctive natural property N that counts as the *weakest* of all the non-disjunctive properties that entail A (so that N is *x*'s minimal supervenience base for having A).

It is reasonable, I think, to hold that the property of obligation meets this condition. The first of the three conditions is just our old friend supervenience, and I've already argued that obligation is at least sensibly thought of as strongly supervening on natural(istic) properties. Is it an *essential feature* of obligation thus to supervene, i.e., is the second condition satisfied? Wedgwood's position here perhaps requires a bit of commentary. Obligation strongly supervenes on natural properties, and does so in every possible world. Now it's not uncommon to think of an essential property or feature of an object *x* as any property *x* has in every possible world in which it exists; thus *self-identity*, *being such that $7 + 5 = 12$* , *being either a horse or a nonhorse*, and *existence* are all essential properties of everything. Wedgwood demurs; an essential property or feature of something, he says, isn't just any old property it has in every world in which it exists; an essential property of a thing has to somehow reveal something significant about the *nature* of that object.³⁷ This condition isn't entirely clear; still, Wedgwood takes it to exclude properties of the sort just mentioned. But then not just any case of strong supervenience, even though it holds in every possible world, constitutes an essential property of the supervening facts or properties. The facts of mathematics supervene on the facts of drunkenness and do so in every possible world (an example he borrows from Timothy Williamson): still, this property isn't closely connected with whatever it is that makes the facts of mathematics what they are, and hence is not an essential property of those facts. This distinction between properties a thing has in every world in which it exists, and properties that are truly essential to it is a little obscure; nevertheless it seems sensible to say, with Wedgwood, that it is part of the very nature or essence of obligation that it supervenes on natural properties.

What about the third condition: is there a non-disjunctive property that counts as the weakest of all the non-disjunctive properties that entail obligation? Again, the notion of a non-disjunctive property is a bit dicey (it's clear what a disjunctive *predicate* is, but much less clear what a disjunctive *property* is), but, supposing we understand it, we can see that

³⁷"we may think of the essence of an object (whether an individual or a universal) as given by the *real definition* of that object—that is, by the basic metaphysical principle that states the nature of that object," p. 141.

there are properties reasonably thought to be non-disjunctive, to entail obligation, and to be such that there aren't any logically weaker properties that entail obligation. For example, an act's having the property *being an act of helping one's aged and needy parents* entails that this act is (prima facie) obligatory, and it isn't clear that there is any weaker non-disjunctive property that entails that A is obligatory. It would then follow, according to Wedgewood, that the property *being an act of helping one's aged and infirm parents* is a minimal supervenience base for obligation. It is important to see, of course, that there may well be many different minimal supervenience bases for obligation; the property *being an act of refraining from stealing* would be another.

It is certainly plausible, therefore, to hold that obligation is realized in natural properties in Wedgewood's sense of 'realized in.' But to show that it is, is certainly not to show that naturalism can accommodate obligation. For, once more, perhaps what makes an act obligatory is a divine command: perhaps what makes an act obligatory is God's commanding all moral agents to perform it. This could certainly be the case even if it is also true that obligation is realized, in the above sense, in natural properties. It could therefore be both that obligation is realized in natural properties, and that any act is obligatory only because it is commanded by God. But then it could be both that obligation is realized in natural properties and that any exemplification of obligation, any case of an action's being obligatory, entails the existence of God. Therefore showing that obligation is realized in natural properties is very far from showing that naturalism can accommodate obligation; it could be both that obligation is thus realized and that any exemplification of obligation entails the falsehood of naturalism.³⁸

VII. A Problem for Theistic Ethics?

The supervenience of the moral on the natural, therefore, raises a problem for naturalists intent on arguing that naturalism can accommodate moral realism—realism about obligation, for example. But doesn't it also raise problems for theistic views of obligation and other moral properties? Theists often think ethical properties are intimately related to what God approves or values or commands. Thus they will often think of moral obligation as in one way or another a matter of what God commands.³⁹ What is obligatory are those actions God commands or wills; what is wrong are those actions God prohibits; what is permissible are those actions God does not prohibit.⁴⁰ They will also tend to think of what is good as what God values or approves. So far, fair enough: where is the problem?

³⁸Wedgewood apparently takes naturalism to be the view that all contingent facts are "realized in" natural or physical facts (p. 201). I've been taking naturalism as the view that there is no such person as God or anything like God. A little reflection reveals, I think, that Wedgewood's version of naturalism entails naturalism in my sense.

³⁹See footnotes 14, 22 and 23.

⁴⁰Of course these bald statements will typically be qualified, as in the view I presented above.

One traditional criticism of theistic ethics is the dreaded Euthyphro problem. The problem is supposed to be that if God commands what he does because it is right, then there is some moral standard outside of God, which seems incompatible with his sovereignty and aseity. On the other hand, if what is right is right because God commands it, then morality seems arbitrary: if God had commanded murder, theft and rapine, then those actions would have been obligatory; if he had commanded hate instead of love, then hateful action would have been right and loving action wrong. As it stands, this alleged criticism is easily handled, at a first level, anyway. The reply is that God's very nature constrains what he commands: it is an essential property of God not to command hate instead of love. There aren't any possible worlds in which God commands hate rather than love. True, at least on the usual semantics for counterfactuals, if God had commanded hate, hate would have been right and love wrong. But this is of no more interest than the fact that if there were no prime numbers, all numbers would be prime. The Euthyphro problem, to a first approximation anyway, is a pseudo-problem.⁴¹

Others find a problem for moral realism in the supervenience of the moral on the descriptive; if that's a problem, it will also be a problem for theistic ethics, since theistic ethics is a variety of moral realism.⁴² It is not uncommon to say that if properties of kind *B* supervene on properties of kind *A*, then properties of kind *A* are more fundamental, or important, or explanatorily basic, or basic in some other way than properties of kind *B*. Thus Simon Blackburn: "Belief in supervenience is then at least the belief that whenever a thing is in some *F* state, this is because it is in some underlying *G* state, or is by virtue of its being in some underlying *G* state."⁴³ I've even heard it said by respectable physicalist philosophers that the supervenience of mental properties on physical properties shows that mental properties really aren't anything 'over and above' physical properties.

Surely this is much too strong. As we have seen, moral properties supervene on descriptive properties and perhaps also on naturalistic properties. But perhaps it is essential to God to issue certain commands to all rational creatures; if so, then *being a command such that it is essential to God to issue it to all rational creatures* supervenes on descriptive and perhaps naturalistic properties. Theists, naturally enough, won't be at all inclined to think of *being a command such that it is essential to God to issue it to all rational creatures* as less important, fundamental, explanatory, or basic than the descriptive or naturalistic properties on which it supervenes.⁴⁴

⁴¹"To a first approximation": perhaps it re-arises at a deeper level: see below, pp. 000.

⁴²Here see Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, chaps. 6 and especially 7; and Timmons and Horgan, "Troubles on Moral Twin Earth," pp. 221ff.

⁴³*Essays in Quasi-Realism*, p. 131.

⁴⁴Obviously this isn't restricted to divine commands. The general issues a command: "Advance!" The property of conforming to this command supervenes on properties involving

They certainly won't think that it is nothing over and above those naturalistic properties.

Clearly, the fact that *B* properties supervene on *A* properties doesn't so much as slyly suggest that *A* properties are more basic, fundamental, explanatory, etc. than *B* properties.⁴⁵ Truth supervenes on being (weakly, strongly, globally), but being also supervenes on truth; it doesn't follow that each is more basic than the other. Suppose *B* properties strongly supervene on *A* properties; then for any *B* property *B* there will be an *A* property *A* (broadly) logically equivalent to it. Since *A* and *B* are equivalent, they will strongly supervene on each other; but of course it is not the case that each is more basic than the other. Nonreductive physicalists usually hold that mental properties supervene on physical properties, and some seem to think that is sufficient for supposing physical properties more fundamental or basic than mental. But again, that doesn't follow for a moment: if mental properties strongly supervene on physical properties, for any mental property *M* there will be a physical property *P* equivalent to it; hence *M* and *P* supervene on each other; hence *P* supervenes on *M*; it doesn't follow that *M* is more basic, etc. than *P*.⁴⁶ In fact this or something in the neighborhood is what has led some physicalist philosophers to declare that you don't get to be a proper physicalist just by holding that mental properties supervene on physical properties; thus Terence Horgan claims that physicalists should endorse 'superdupervenience,' rather than mere supervenience (see footnote 45) and Jaegwon Kim⁴⁷ claims that supervenience is a statement of the problem, not the solution to it.

Superdupervenience, however, does point to a possible problem in the neighborhood for theistic ethics, a problem that is not a mere pseudo-problem. The theist is likely to hold that moral obligation is to be understood in terms of some property *P* (perhaps the property of being such that it is an essential property of God to command all persons to perform it) involving God's will: having this property *P* is what makes an action

the movement of the troops; it is not the case that the latter properties are more basic than or explanatory or determinative of the former.

⁴⁵One could simply *define* supervenience as involving the subvening properties being more basic, fundamental, robustly explanatory, etc., than the supervening properties (or even the supervening properties not being anything 'over and above' the subvening properties); then 'supervenience' would express approximately the same property as Terence Horgan's "superdupervenience" ("From Supervenience to Superdupervenience: Meeting the Demands of a Material World," *Mind* [1993]). But then, of course, it is no longer at all obvious that moral properties super(duper)vene on descriptive or naturalistic properties.

⁴⁶From the theistic point of view, it is a necessary truth that physical properties (globally) supervene on mental properties; worlds in which God believes the same propositions are worlds in which physical properties (as well as properties of any other sort) are distributed in the same way. The converse doesn't follow: mental properties don't strongly supervene on physical properties. For clearly there could be a pair of worlds *w* and *w** physically alike but in which God held different beliefs; perhaps in *w* but not *w** he believes that a certain angel thinks a certain thought. I have put this in terms of global supervenience, but given a sufficiently latitudinarian conception of properties, there will be an equivalent formulation in terms of individual supervenience.

⁴⁷*Mind in a Physical World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

obligatory. If so, obligation and P supervene on each other. The theist also wants to hold that what is obligatory, is obligatory *because* it has P ; she does not hold that an action has P because that action is obligatory. But how can that be, if each supervenes on the other? What is needed here is an asymmetrical dependence relation between properties that are logically equivalent.⁴⁸ God's will is more basic, more fundamental, and explanatorily prior to obligation; obligation depends upon God's will in a way in which God's will does not depend upon obligation. So *is* there a relation of this kind—a relation of asymmetrical dependence between properties that are logically equivalent? We might think of this as the revenge (or reappearance) of the Euthyphro problem; the theist holds that an act is obligatory because God enjoins it, but it is not the case that God enjoins an act because it is obligatory.

A relation like this is required in other places as well. For example, the theist may think of *propositions* as divine thoughts and *properties* as divine concepts. The proposition *China is smaller than the Netherlands* exists necessarily because it is an essential property of God to think this thought, so that he thinks it in every possible world (although he affirms it in only some worlds.) But it is not the case that God thinks this thought in every possible world because it is a necessary truth that this proposition exists. The proposition $7 + 5 = 12$ is necessarily true: that is because it is an essential property of God to think that thought affirmatively ("with assent," as Augustine says); but it is not the case that it is part of God's nature to think that thought affirmatively because it is necessary that $7 + 5 = 12$. The theist may think of sets as divine collections, divine thinkings-together (Georg Cantor),⁴⁹ which would explain why no set is a member of itself and why there is no universal set. Then she will take it that items $a_1, a_2, \dots, a_n, \dots$ form a set because God thinks them together; but it is not the case that God thinks them together because they form a set.

Accordingly, the theist needs an asymmetrical dependence relation between equivalent properties and propositions, and even between necessary propositions and necessarily exemplified properties, both in ethics and more generally as well; but *is* there any such relation? Are there any clear and uncontroversial examples of such a relation? (Or at any rate *relatively* uncontroversial, since that is the best one can hope for in philosophy?) Yes indeed: the much vaunted relation between truth and being furnishes relations of just this kind. The propositions *all men are mortal* and *it is true that all men are mortal* are equivalent, but the second is true because the first is, and not conversely. The propositions $7 + 5 = 12$ and *it is true that $7 + 5 = 12$* are equivalent; the second is true because the first is, but not conversely. We can find similar relations among properties. The number 7 has

⁴⁸Of course a relation of this sort is also what the nonreductive physicalist needs, if she hopes to see mental properties as less basic or fundamental than the physical properties on which they supervene.

⁴⁹See M. J. Hallett, *Cantor's Set Theory and Limitation of Size* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

essentially the property of being such that it is true that it is prime. It has that property because it has essentially the property of being prime; but it is not the case that it has essentially the property of being prime because it has essentially the property of being such that it is true that it is prime. Perhaps still another case of this asymmetrical dependence or explanatory relation is in analyses: S knows that p because . . . p . . . (fill in your favorite analysis of knowledge, if you are rash enough to have one); it is not the case that . . . p . . . because S knows that p . Theistic ethics requires an asymmetrical dependence or explanatory relation between propositions and properties that are equivalent in the broadly logical sense. This is not as puzzling as it may initially seem; a similar relation is to be found in many other areas.

By way of conclusion: the supervenience of moral properties on naturalistic properties presents a real (I would say insoluble) problem for one who wants to make a case for the idea that metaphysical naturalism can accommodate morality. Given this supervenience, for any moral property there will be a naturalistic property equivalent to it; hence, even if what makes an action right is a property obviously entailing that there is such a person as God, there may still be a naturalistic property equivalent to it. But then one can't show that rightness is naturalistically acceptable by finding a naturalistic property to which it is equivalent. If, on the other hand, sparsism is true, then one can't even show that rightness is naturalistic by finding an apparently naturalistic property to which it is identical. That is because, given sparsism, rightness might also be identical with the property *being in accord with God's will*. Finally, the supervenience of the moral on the naturalistic might be thought also to create a problem for theistic ethics; this appearance, however, is mere appearance.⁵⁰

University of Notre Dame

⁵⁰Thanks for wise counsel and penetrating comment to David Merli, Brian Boeninger, Kenny Boyce, Michael DePaul, William FitzPatrick, Tom Flint, Eric Hagedorn, Marcin Iwanicki, Nate King, Matthew Lee, Sam Newlands, Anne Peterson, Brian Pitts, Josh Rasmussen, Michael Rea, Aaron Segal, Luke Van Horn, Mark Murphy (who, as the 2009–2010 Plantinga Fellow in the Center for Philosophy of Religion, has a particular interest in forestalling foolish mistakes on the part of this paper's eponymous author), and especially Terence Cuneo.