

Robust Moral Realism and the Supervenience Argument

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Abstract

The paper examines the supervenience argument advanced by the robust moral realists in defense of moral realism. How defensible is the supervenience argument? The paper argues that answer to this question is not as straight forward as the proponents of the robust realism assumed. It argues that defending supervenience argument without paying proper attention to details about the main tenets of moral realism in relation to “is and ought” gap that exists between natural and non-natural properties is largely responsible for why moral realists assume that up till now, there is no demonstrative argument to show that their supervenience argument had been persuasively refuted. This paper does not intend to fill the traditional gap in favor of moral realism. Instead, it intends to challenge such assumption. The paper concludes that the supervenience argument is not as defensible as the proponents of the theory have claimed.

Keywords: moral realism, supervenience, moral properties, natural properties, moral facts.

1. Introduction

In meta-ethical inquiry, it is often argued that the supervenience of moral properties on natural properties is one of the central and indispensable features of moral realism. This view is often defended by the scholars who subscribe to the non-naturalistic/robust version of the moral realism.¹ As a matter of fact, moral realism as a meta-ethical theory has two major arguments developed by its proponents to defend its thesis against the opponents. These arguments include first; the supervenience argument (the general claim by the moral realists that the moral supervenes on the natural. That is, moral properties supervene on natural properties). The second is the argument from the phenomenology of moral discourse (the claim that our day-to-day talk supports the ontological status of moral facts). The concern of this paper is the former. Meanwhile, the later will be discussed somewhere else. Before moving further, it is imperative as a matter of

¹ Moral Realism comes in variants. There is the naturalist/non-robust version and the non-naturalist/robust version. The former states that moral facts are reducible to natural facts, while the latter states that moral facts are not reducible to natural facts. Our focus in this paper is the non-naturalist/robust version. The reason is because naturalist version does not have serious problem with supervenience argument like the non-naturalistic/robust version. In fact, the robust version of realism championed the view that non-natural properties supervene on natural properties. For details, See Wilson Mendonca “Dreier on the supervenience argument against robust realism,” *Unisinos Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 18, No. 3, (2017): 167. Also, Joshua Schechter, “Five kinds of epistemic arguments against robust moral realism” in Paul Bloomfield and David Copp (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Moral Realism*, Oxford: Oxford, 2023, p. 345.

necessity, to first of all clarify what I mean by realism in general and moral realism in particular in order to situate my discussion in a proper context.

What are the major tenets of moral realism, or what do moral realists stand for? In today's world, there is a moral need to locate the theoretical foundation of most of the challenges we are confronted with. For instance, child-marriage is a controversial moral issue currently. But, are there moral facts about child marriage? Is the wrongness (in case it is wrong) of same sex marriage objective? Is the step being taken by the Lagos State Government of Nigeria to ban public smoking wrong? Is the act wrong because the government forbids it or would be wrong even if there is no law against it? For instance, in Alabama and 14 other States in the United States of America, all abortion services have been ceased. Meanwhile, Alaska and some other States allow abortion. But, are there moral facts about abortion? Is the rightness or wrongness of abortion dependent on or independent of the individual making the value judgment? Are there human actions that are wrong or right no matter what? Most people or even culture condemn incest but is the act wrong because most people condemn it, or would the act still be wrong even if no person on earth is aware of it? Meta-ethical theorists engage in debates as regards how to address some of the above moral questions.

This paper intends to achieve at least two things. First, an examination of the main tenets of moral realism. Two, a critical assessment of the supervenience argument shall be considered.

2. Analyzing the main tenets of moral realism

Moral realism is a meta-ethical theory that affirms the existence of moral facts. It suggests that moral facts exist independently of individual minds. It is the view that in certain regard, there is an objective moral reality. Moral realists make the following claims that:

- i. There are moral facts; moral facts exist in the world irrespective of whether or not they are perceived (Railton, 1986: 165).
- ii. Certain sentences and mental representations purport to represent moral facts (Schechter, 2023: 346).
- iii. Moral facts are objective.
- iv. Some basic moral properties and relations are exemplified (Schechter, 346).
- v. Moral properties and relations are not identical with, reducible to, or fully grounded in natural properties and relations (Schechter, 2023: 346); and
- vi. Moral facts are discoverable just like scientific facts (Railton, 1986: 165).

One way to separate the robust moral realism from the naturalist version is to consider what each of them accept. While the naturalist moral realists accept i, ii, vi, the non-naturalist/robust moral realists accept i, ii, iii, iv, v. In any case, if moral realists' claims above are true, then it would be possible to arrive at moral decisions about certain human actions. If moral realism is true, then the wrongness of human actions like killing, rape, stealing, and arson will be objectively true. To be consistent, a moral realist is likely to hold the view that it is possible to objectively determine the wrongness of stealing. However, there is a little worry as to whether or not the wrongness of stealing or rape could be objectively determined. Can we objectively determine the wrongness of rape in marriage? This is controversial. In agreement with moral anti-realism, certain actions that are generally regarded as objectively wrong may not, after all be wrong. Before the evaluation of the act of rape, it is necessary to know how the notion of rape is generally understood. Rape occurs when a man or a woman forcefully (without consent) engages in sexual activities with a woman or a man, as the case may be. If rape is defined the way it has just been defined, then is the act always wrong in marriage? Imagine a wife raped by her husband

or a husband raped by his wife due to the fact that one party (husband or wife) consistently denies the other party of sex.

Someone may argue that the act is wrong since the consent of the wife or the husband is not sought. This may even not be true. The issue really is that the consent is always sought by one of the parties but not granted by the other. So, the consent is sought but not granted. All the same, there is an absence of consent. On the other hand, the consistent denial of sex within marriage is a breach of contract. One of the main reasons for marriage is the satisfaction of sexual urge of the husband and wife. In this case, there is a clash of consent and contract. So, if rape is viewed from the point of view of consent it could be said to be wrong. On the other hand, if viewed from the terms of contract in marriage, it could be declared right. With this example, the moral realists point about the objective wrongness of rape has to be taken with a pinch of salt.

What about stealing? Are there moral facts about stealing right there in the world that makes it wrong at all times? This is equally controversial. Stealing is generally defined as the act of taking something that belongs to another person without his or her consent. For the sake of argument, let us imagine that Mr. X takes an inhaler from Mr. Y's store to save a life of an asthmatic patient, since the latter's consent could not be obtained as at the time of the urgent need. Just like the first example, there is a moral clash between Mr. X's property right and the moral need to save human life. The implication of the moral clash is that, the moral realist claim about the objectivity of the wrongness of stealing could be wrong. Moral anti-realist denial of such objectivity appears more convincing (Olanipekun, 2024: 65).

According to Jonathan Dancy, moral realism suggests that moral thought has its own subject matter, distinct from science and all-natural inquiries (Dancy, 1998: 535). Second, the theory also affirms that moral judgment is an attempt to determine a matter of fact that is independent of any beliefs we might have about it. The fact is one thing, and what we think about it is another thing (Dancy, 535). Generally, moral realists support the objectivity of ethics. Moral realists are of the view that moral facts can be discovered within the structures of the universe since such moral facts are parts of the structures of the world. For moral realists, the truth of moral beliefs is independent of personal and private feelings of approval or disapproval of an individual. Moral realists are of the views that it is possible to conclusively determine the rightness or wrongness of certain actions. If an action is right, then its rightness has nothing to do with personal feelings or approval of the individual. Moral realism is the idea that "moral truth is grounded in the nature of things (moral claims) rather than in subjective and variable human reactions to things (the moral claims) (Blackburn, 2005: 253).

In the light of the above view, Richard Werner argues that, there are moral facts just as there are scientific facts and the point about justification in ethics is as legitimate and objective as we have in science (Warner, 1983: 653). What does this imply? Moral realists are of the view that we are justified in our belief about the independent existence of moral entities and facts just as we are justified in claiming the existence of scientific entities such protons, neutrons and others. The moral realists claim that there are moral facts that are part of the structures of the universe is a thesis in ontology, the study of what is. William Tolhurst presents the moral realist ontological thesis thus: "Moral realists hold that morality is objective, that moral facts are discovered not legislated or created, the truth of our moral beliefs is independent of our evidence for them and independent of our feelings of approval or disapproval. They are objective truth" (Tulhurst, 1986: 43). Furthermore, William Boyce also states the moral realist ontological minimum claims below: "An objectivist theory is one in which ethical assertions are not believed to be mere statements of attitude, but rather are held to reflect an "objective" transcendent moral truth that is independent of anyone's feelings" (Boyce & Jenson, 1976: 64). This is a denial of all appearance of emotivism.

As mentioned above, moral realist's ontological thesis is a direct denial of moral anti-realist claims about the relevance of attitudes to the truth or falsity of ethical statement. In a way,

moral objectivism projects the view that the actual moral wrongness or rightness of an act transcends and independent of any of the feelings of a moral agent towards such act. For Gensler, the objective view (also called-moral realism) claims that some things are objectively right or wrong, independently of what anyone may think or feel (Gensler, 1998: 15). For Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, moral realism holds that the appropriate truth-conditions make no reference to anyone's subjective states or to the capacities, conventions, or practices of any group of people (Sayre-McCord, 1988: 20). For Sayre McCord, it is surely a strange reversal of the natural order of thought to say that our admiring an action either is, or is what necessitates, its being good. We think of its goodness as what we admire in it, and as something it would have even if no one admired it, something that it has in itself (Sayre-McCord, 1988).

For Richard Boyd, the associated rational supervenience of moral facts and moral opinions upon non-moral factual properties or opinion indicates that, by contrast, there is an alternative realist explanation for divergence and intractability which is ratified by all the currently plausible moral theories (Boyd, 1988: 223). Essentially, the realists projected the supervenience argument as a strong argument which makes their theory attractive. However, what does supervenience argument entail? The next section will address this pivotal question.

3. What is this supervenience argument?

Starting with two senses of the term, supervenience as a philosophical term has been given different interpretations among the robust moral realists. From ontological point of view, Ausonio and Yli-Vakkuri conceived supervenience argument to mean the view that; "All properties (non-physical properties) strongly supervene on physical properties. In other words: necessarily, for all properties P, all objects x, and all times t: if x has P at t, then, for some physical property P', x has P' at t and, necessarily, for all y and all times t', if y has P' at t', then y has M at t'" (Ausonio & Yli-Vakkuri, 2008: 103). In this case, the relation between physical properties and non-physical properties was established, with non-physical supervening over physical. Let us consider the example of relation between natural and non-natural properties given by Drier for a better understanding:

Consider the relation between the sentence "John drank some water" and the sentence "John drank some H₂O." If the first is true, the second must be. Any possible world in which John drank some water is a world in which John drank some H₂O. That's because water is H₂O. As we might say, the property of being water is identical with the property of being H₂O. Or anyway, so many philosophers are happy to say since Kripke explained rigid designation in Naming and Necessity. The expressions "water" and "H₂O" rigidly designate the same natural kind. Now suppose something like that is true of the pair of expressions, "good" and "producing the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (or some other naturalistic predicate). They designate the same property in every world (Drier, 1992: 19).

The above explanation by Drier is not too different from Ausonio and Yli-Vakkuri's position. In ethics, it is frequently claimed that the term "supervene" was first used in its contemporary philosophical sense by R. M. Hare, who used it to characterize a relationship between moral properties and natural properties (Hare, 1952: 145). When Blackburn saw how the moral realists were using the supervenience argument in a confusing manner, he argued that to tell which moral quality results from a given natural state means using standards whose correctness cannot be shown by conceptual means alone.

Furthermore, we are also considering two kinds of relations that hold between, for example, moral properties and natural ones. In Drier's analysis of Blackburn's interpretation of the supervenience argument, Drier summarized the general argument presented by Blackburn this way. The view is that, a certain supervenience claim, one connecting the moral realm to the

natural, is true. But a contrary claim is false. The realist cannot explain why the weaker connection should hold, given that the stronger one does not, while the anti-realist can easily explain this. So, realism accrues a debt of explanation which it cannot discharge (Drier, 1992: 14).

Basically, the claim that moral anti-realism is more plausible than moral realism does not mean that moral realism as a theory is not attractive in any way. There are certain positive arguments such as the phenomenological argument in support of moral realism which make the theory attractive. This means, moral realism receives its support from the nature and structure of human language. Human expressions seem to support moral realism. Our up-bringing, cultural beliefs and disbeliefs, practices seem to support the existence of certain moral facts. There are certain actions we disapprove because they are wrong and such actions are not wrong because of the disapproval. It would be very difficult to produce arguments that will approve unprovoked killing. Suppose x kills y and the former is asked to justify the killing of the latter. The justification "I kill y because I do not like his or her face" will not be acceptable. If this is so then, there are facts about the wrongness of unprovoked killing. Therefore, the wrongness of unprovoked killing could be objective.

Besides, the reality of moral deliberations confirms the possibility of moral facts. Our moral deliberations will be an exercise in futility if such deliberations are not aimed towards certain facts that are right there in the world. Carl Wellman in "Emotivism and Ethical Objectivity" offers strong arguments in support of the objectivity and reality of moral facts. According to Wellman, there are moral facts "when one speaker says "this is good" and another says "no, it is bad", their utterances certainly seem to be incompatible" (Wellman, 1968: 90). If ethical sentences are expressions of emotion, then there will not be contradictions in ethics. However, there are contradictions in ethics and so two different ethical sentences do clash. One of the best arguments offers by Wellman in support of the objectivity of ethics is stated thus: In ordinary English, we frequently speak of ethical sentences as true or false...the language of ethics includes questions. A factual question expresses doubt about the nature of reality and is a request for information (Wellman, 1968: 90).

As mentioned earlier, another important point in support of moral realism is the argument about the supervenience of moral facts on natural facts. Even though this is not without flaws, the argument is meant to bridge the traditional gap between "is" and "ought."² Generally, moral anti-realism partly derived its strength from the gulf claimed to exist between what is the case and what ought to be the case. It has been argued that an evaluative conclusion cannot be derived from factual premises due to the unbridgeable gap between them. The argument from supervenience seems not to meet the challenge. The robust moral realists need to understand that relationship between the statement of fact and statement about value is not exhaustively explained by the supervenience relationships. Let us move to the next section for details.

4. How plausible is moral realists' supervenience argument?

Having considered the main tenets of moral realism in relation to "is and ought" gap that exists between natural and non-natural properties, the next equally important question is

² "Is" and "Ought": "Is" (statements about facts about the world) and "Ought" (statements about moral facts). The history of the relationship or gap between "Is" and "Ought", was articulated by David Hume. Hume argued that there is no legitimate logical transition between "Is" and "Ought". This discussion has generated a debated because some scholars believe that "Ought" can be reduced to "Is", while some others strongly objected to this reduction by claiming irreducibility of the sphere of "Ought". For details, see Szymon Osmola and Wojciech Zaluski, "'Is' and 'Ought' in Hume's and Kant's Philosophy" in M. Sellers, and S. Kirste (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy*, Springer Science, 2017, pp. 1-7.

that; how can moral realism convincingly account for the supervenience of non-natural moral properties on natural properties? Answer to this question is not as straight forward as moral realists assumed. Given that bridging the traditional gap between “is” and “ought” is a serious business for philosophers especially in moral domain, let us first consider two passages from Blackburn for better understanding. This will enable us to see how and why believed that the only reason why supervenience argument could appear to be conceptually true is merely based on the way we use our language.

It seems to be a conceptual matter that moral claims supervene upon natural ones. Anyone failing to realize this, or to obey the constraint, would indeed lack something constitutive of competence in the moral practice. And there is good reason for this: it would betray the whole purpose for which we moralize, which is to choose, commend, rank, approve, or forbid things on the basis of their natural properties (Blackburn, 2005: 97).

It should be noted that Blackburn had emphasized something similar to the view expressed above even a decade earlier. According to him, our purpose in projecting value predicates may demand that we respect supervenience. If we allowed ourselves a system which was like ordinary evaluative practice, but subject to no such constraint, then it would allow us to treat naturally identical cases in morally different ways (Blackburn, 1984: 186).

What is the import of the above quotations? Even though Blackburn’s seems to agree that the plausibility of supervenience argument is founded on mere ordinary evaluative practices, we should be skeptical about whether the moral realists would accept Blackburn’s submission. In my view, the problem is not really about whether the realists would accept that their position is faulty or not. The problem is about whether the plausibility of the supervenience argument is truly founded on mere linguistic usage or not. Let us call this a linguistic constraint. To buttress Blackburn’s allegation, Russ Shafer-Landua also toes the same path going by his explanation. According to him, if the moral fails to supervene on the non-moral, then the non-moral world does not control the moral world. But if that world does not control the moral world, then the moral world is out of control. Moral assessments would be arbitrary (Shafer-Landua, 2005: 258). As a build-up on the above, Shafer-Landau submitted that “I think that reflection on these matters reveals what many philosophers have claimed: that the moral, as a matter of conceptual truth, supervenes on the descriptive. We cannot conceive of a plausible moral order that licenses different moral ascriptions for situations that are in all other respects identical” (Shafer-Landua, 2005: 258).

Shafer-Landau’s view is a build-up on Blackburn’s claim by introducing the notion of conceptual truth. I choose to call this a conceptual constraint. Meanwhile, Matthew Kramer contends that one should agree with Blackburn that supervenience is a foundational property of morality, and one can concur *arguendo* with his explanation of its status as such a property (Blackburn, 2009: 348). For the exponents of supervenience arguments, there are moral facts because the relationship between moral facts and natural facts is similar to the relationships between natural objects and their atomic properties. The argument from supervenience starts with the initial assumption about the reality of certain material properties. Besides material properties, there are non-material properties. The nonmaterial properties supervene on or are dependent on material properties.

Among the non-material properties are moral properties which though not like material properties in certain respect, but owe their existence to the reality of material properties. Every property, i.e. biological social, psychological, and moral properties are different parts of the same property (Brink, 1984: 120). The argument from supervenience is fascinating. The notion of supervenience is well stated by R.M. Hare. If two material objects share the same properties, then it is not possible to maintain that the first is good while the other is not good. The impossibility is due to the fact that the evaluative remark depends on the material properties of the two objects

(Hare, 1952: 145). How Plausible is the supervenience argument? How much support does it offer moral realism? As already hinted earlier, moral realism may be plausible in certain regard but our thesis is that, it is not plausible in some other regards. Let us briefly examine the supervenience argument in support of moral realism stated above.

Though, moral realism is said to have some degree of plausibility, some of the arguments in its support appear not really strong. The moral anti-realists argue that the claim that existence of moral beliefs support the existence of moral fact is rejected (Graig, 1998: 538). As Edward Craig hinted, it has been argued that we do not need to infer a separate existence of moral facts from the reality of moral beliefs. Moral beliefs are explanatorily sufficient to explain our moral convictions (Graig, 538). The above point by Edward Craig casts doubts on realists' supervenience argument. This is because, robust moral realists' argument lacks convincing account of how and why moral beliefs are necessary for proper understanding of moral facts. The lack of convincing account is a major challenge to moral realism.

Now, are moral realists stuck? There appear to be a way out for moral realism. Moral realists might however, argue that at least, the facts explain the beliefs. Therefore, the argument about the link between moral facts and moral beliefs is still germane. While reacting to moral realists' defense, in *The Nature of Morality*, a non-realist such as Gilbert Harman responded that the beliefs can be equally well explained in other ways without making reference to moral facts. It is quite possible to trace the origin of moral beliefs to human upbringing and education. Thus, our reference to beliefs to explain moral facts may not be necessary since there is an alternative explanation (Harman, 1977: 7).

Furthermore, J. L. Mackie is a strong opponent of moral realism. Mackie's argument from queerness dealt a deadly blow to moral realism as well as their supervenience argument. For Mackie, values, if they existed, would be very peculiar things, unlike anything else in the universe; so queer are they that, if they existed, we would need a special faculty of moral perception or intuition to perceive them (Mackie, 1998: 11). Mackie rejects moral facts thus: We ordinarily say, for instance, that an action was wrong because it was cruel. But "just what in the world is signified by this *because*"? not only is there the wrongness and the cruelty, but also a totally mysterious "consequential link" between the two (Mackie, 1977: 41). Just as the moral facts are strange to Mackie, in moral discourse, supervenience argument will also be strange.

Arising from the above, Mackie argues that "is-ought" distinction is real and any attempt to bridge the gap creates strange entities called moral facts (Mackie, 1977: 41). In this respect it seems moral anti-realist denial of moral facts/value is strong. There are no moral facts because moral judgments depend on individual point of view. The implication is that if there are no moral facts as mentioned by Mackie, the supervenience argument will be useless and unnecessary. One question that comes to mind is that; will there be moral facts in a world populated by zero human beings? This is not likely to be the case. If this is so, then moral judgments as maintained by moral anti-realists, depend on individual point of view. Such moral facts are not part of the structure of the universe and the supervenience argument will be a baseless fabrication. Even though the supervenience argument is one of the strongest weapons adopted by moral realists in support of their thesis, I still doubt whether that argument is as strong as it is generally believed.

In another development, if the moral realists agree that the paradigm justification for moral knowledge is based on intuition or *a priori* awareness of moral properties as G. E. Moore maintains, consequently, they have to reject causal reductionism, according to which the causal power of the supervening moral facts are entirely reducible to that of natural facts. Otherwise, by implication, the epistemological thesis of the moral realists stands to undermine their earlier upheld metaphysical proposition. In other words, can moral property be reduced to non-moral

property the same way water is reduced to H₂O when we analyze its chemical property? This is controversial.

Another possible quick response to supervenience argument defended by the moral naturalist-realists is this. It can be argued that moral realists cannot hold on to their position that there are moral facts, by claiming that the ontological status of moral facts could be demonstrated on the ground that moral facts supervene on, or are the consequences of natural facts. In Tweyman's account of David Hume, "no set of non-moral premises can entail a moral conclusion, ...there can be no demonstrative arguments to prove, that those instances of which we have had no experience resemble those of which we have had experience" (Tweyman, 1995: 490).

In other words, there is no situation in which a description of natural qualities is supposed to give rise automatically to an ethical conclusion. In the light of this, it is not only the case that moral realists are wrong for holding moral beliefs about things because of their naturalistic property, the question can also be raised that, why should a realists theory such as supervenience thesis accept that things believed to be naturally alike cannot be believed to be of distinct worth? The realists as we have seen, offer no explanation of why this sort of inconsistency in moral belief.

In addition, another problem that poses a serious challenge to the moral realists over their celebrated supervenience thesis is the "question/problem of relation". The problem is this: How do we explain the mysterious connection they claim to exist between the natural facts and moral facts? Or what does this "supervenience/ consequent upon" mean? Thus, the problem with the realists is that there is no convincing explanation on how to bridge this wide gulf between "is" and "ought" as well as facts/value distinction.

On a critical note, one possible counter objection against the realists' supervenience argument is this. There is a suspicion that the moral realists have a tendency to fall victim of the naturalistic fallacy of G. E. Moore if care is not taking. The reason is because, any attempt to argue that non-natural or moral property supervene on natural property will amount to making a mistake that all metaphysical ethicists (moral realists inclusive) are often accused of making. Anyway, moral realists might defend themselves that they are not guilty of the naturalistic fallacy. They might argue that the claim that they commit naturalistic fallacy is not accurate because G. E. Moore's definition of naturalistic fallacy does not capture the concept of "supervenience".

In the final analysis, this paper is not a total denial of moral realism. In fact, it was pointed out that the theory is plausible in some respects. But, having examined the realist's supervenience argument and the objections against their position, I want to conclude this paper by contending that the supervenience argument is not as defensible as the proponents of the theory have claimed. due to certain constraints identified in the paper.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined through critical analysis, philosophical argumentation and conceptual clarification the supervenience argument advanced by moral realists. Scholars such as Simon Blackburn (1971, 1984 & 2005), and James Dreier (1992) have made considerable effort to champion and analyze this argument against the position of the realists. However, little attention is paid to the proper analysis of the main tenets of moral realism in relation to "is and ought" gap that exists between natural and non-natural properties. This lacuna enabled moral realists to assume that up till now, there is no demonstrative argument to show that their supervenience argument had been persuasively refuted. This paper challenged such assumption. The paper concluded that the supervenience argument is not as defensible as the proponents of the theory have claimed. In this paper, I have been able to achieve at least three things: first, the examination of the minimum claims of moral realism; two, clarification of what the supervenience argument

entails, and third, I have concluded this paper with a critical assessment of the supervenience argument of the non-naturalist moral realism.

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