



DISCUSSION NOTE

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JOURNAL OF ETHICS & SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

DISCUSSION NOTE | OCTOBER 2011

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The Failure of Brown's New Supervenience Argument

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IN 1998, FRANK JACKSON ADVANCED an influential argument against the existence of irreducible ethical properties.¹ Campbell Brown has recently offered what he describes as a new and improved version of this argument.² Meanwhile, a meta-ethical view sometimes called “robust normative realism” has attracted a number of contemporary defenders. David Enoch characterizes this view as follows: “[I]here are response-independent, non-natural, irreducibly normative truths...objective ones, that when successful in our normative inquiries we discover rather than create or construct.”³ Robust normative realists maintain that at least some normative properties are not fully reducible to properties of some other kind. Thus, if Brown's argument is sound, then robust normative realism is false. I argue here that Brown's argument fails.

2. Brown's Argument

After describing four worries about Jackson's original argument, Brown presents his version:⁴

- (1) Ethical properties supervene on descriptive properties.
- (2) If ethical properties supervene on descriptive properties, then all non-descriptive ethical properties are *redundant*, in the sense that they do no work in distinguishing possibilities.
- (3) No properties are redundant.
- (4) All ethical properties are descriptive properties.⁵

¹ Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 113-28. The type of argument Jackson gives goes back at least to Jaegwon Kim's “Supervenience and Nomological Incommensurables,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15(2) (1978): 149-56; see especially pp. 153-54. Critical discussions of Jackson's argument are plentiful; for a useful recent discussion see Jussi Suikkanen, “Non-Naturalism: The Jackson Challenge,” in Russ Shafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Volume 5* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 87-110. For an exploration (and ultimately a rejection) of the plausibility of resisting Jackson's argument by rejecting certain elements of the S5 modal logic, see Johannes Schmitt and Mark Schroeder, “Supervenience Arguments Under Relaxed Assumptions,” *Philosophical Studies* 155 (2011): 133-60.

² Campbell Brown, “A New and Improved Supervenience Argument for Ethical Descriptivism,” in Russ Shafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Volume 6* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 205-18.

³ David Enoch, “An Outline of an Argument for Robust Metanormative Realism,” in Russ Shafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Volume 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 21-50, p. 21. For a helpful explanation of what it is for a property to be *objective* in the relevant sense, see Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 2-4.

⁴ Brown, “Supervenience Argument,” pp. 207-10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

Brown understands supervenience *globally*, where ethical properties supervene on descriptive properties just in case any two possible worlds that are exactly alike in their descriptive properties are also exactly alike in their ethical properties.⁶ He explains *redundancy* this way:

The test for whether a set of properties is redundant...is to see what would happen if it were...taken away. If the result would be a loss in the distinguishability of worlds...then the properties in this set (or at least some of them) are contributing to distinguishing possibilities; without them, fewer possibilities could be distinguished. If there would be no such loss...then the properties are redundant.⁷

More precisely: a given property P is redundant just in case for every pair of possible worlds w1 and w2 that are indistinguishable with respect to at least every property but P, w1 and w2 are also indistinguishable with respect to all properties (including P).⁸

3. A Critique of Brown's Case Against Redundant Properties

The most promising strategy for resisting Brown's argument involves questioning premise (3).⁹ Brown supports (3) thusly:

The rationale for premise (3) is a certain maxim of ontological parsimony: posit only so many properties as are required to distinguish possibilities. One who denied (3), who held that there were redundant properties...would thereby be in breach of this maxim.¹⁰

This appeal to parsimony is both an important respect in which Brown's argument differs from Jackson's and the primary weakness in Brown's argument.¹¹

Consider the following line of reasoning. Suppose that the God of traditional monotheism exists. This God exists in every possible world and is essentially omniscient (for any proposition p, if p is true, then p is known [and hence believed] by God) and essentially infallible (for any proposition p, if God believes that p, then p is true), which implies that necessarily, for any

⁶ Ibid., p. 205.

⁷ Ibid., p. 212.

⁸ This formulation is based on Brown's "Definition 5" on p. 212 of his paper. Brown takes indistinguishability as a primitive; see p. 211, n. 11.

⁹ Brown does not defend (1) and says he is happy if his argument establishes the conditional claim that "if supervenience holds, then ethical descriptivism is true" (ibid., p. 210). Given Brown's understanding of supervenience and redundancy, (2) seems beyond doubt. So it seems that (3) is where all the action is.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 212.

¹¹ Jackson does appeal to parsimony, but in support of a different point; see Jackson, *Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 127.

proposition p , p is true if and only if God believes p .¹² Thus, for every pair of possible worlds w_1 and w_2 that are indistinguishable with respect to at least all properties except being believed by God, it is also the case that w_1 and w_2 are indistinguishable with respect to all properties. Consequently, the property of being believed by God is redundant in Brown's sense. By similar reasoning, the property of being true is also redundant.¹³ If there are no redundant properties, then at least one of these properties (being true or being believed by God) does not exist. Thus, (3) implies that the existence of the God of traditional monotheism is incompatible with there being some truths, from which it surely follows that this God does not exist. This argument seems too fast.

Next, consider the debate over qualia – phenomenal properties or the “what-it’s-like” aspects of conscious experience. Some parties to the debate over qualia maintain that phenomenal properties are distinct from yet globally supervene on physical properties. For example, a central element of Colin McGinn’s “new mysterianism” is the claim that there are logical entailments from the existence of certain brain states to the existence of qualia; however, we are constitutionally incapable of comprehending the relevant brain states (at least with our current brains).¹⁴ But if we could somehow understand the relevant brain states, it would be “as obvious that consciousness could arise from the brain as it is obvious that bachelors are unmarried males.”¹⁵ This view implies that every pair of possible worlds that are indistinguishable with respect to at least all properties except their phenomenal properties are also indistinguishable with respect to all properties. Consequently, McGinn’s view implies that phenomenal properties are redundant in Brown’s sense. If there are no redundant properties, then McGinn’s view is false. Again, this reasoning seems too fast.

Brown’s rationale for premise (3) is adequate only if the only good reason to believe that a particular property is instantiated is that the instantiation of that property would serve to distinguish possibilities. He claims that the maxim “posit only so many properties as are required to distinguish possibilities” is “just a particular application of...Occam’s Razor (don’t multiply entities beyond necessity).”¹⁶ Contemporary debates about theism and qualia il-

¹² I speak here of the God of “Perfect Being Theology”; for a useful discussion, see Thomas Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 1997), pp. 35-40. For a discussion of the relevant conception of an *essential property*, see Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 55-60.

¹³ Assume that God exists. Since this God is essentially omniscient and infallible and exists in every possible world, each pair of worlds that is indistinguishable with respect to all properties except truth will also be indistinguishable with respect to truth (because God’s beliefs will be the same in both worlds, and hence all and only the same truths will hold in both worlds).

¹⁴ Colin McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 48-49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹⁶ Brown, “Supervenience Argument,” pp. 212-13.

lustrate the contentiousness of such a claim. Theists have suggested a variety of reasons to believe in God, ranging from abstract philosophical arguments like the ontological argument to the claim of reformed epistemologists like Alvin Plantinga that God's existence is simply obvious to many people.¹⁷ Such proposals purport to provide reasons to believe in God that have nothing to do with theism's capacity to distinguish possibilities. Similarly, none of McGinn's various arguments for mysterianism appeals to the claim that we need phenomenal properties in order to distinguish possibilities. McGinn's overall strategy is to consider the various alternatives to his position and argue that each has implausible implications. His mysterianism is (allegedly) left standing as the most plausible option on offer.¹⁸

Like theists and new mysterians, robust normative realists have put forward a variety of reasons to accept their view that have nothing to do with robust normative realism's usefulness in distinguishing possibilities. For example, Michael Huemer claims: "When we think about certain kinds of events (say), we see intuitively that they have this further, evaluative property in addition to their natural properties, and we intend our word 'good' to refer to that property."¹⁹ For Huemer, irreducible moral properties are not invoked to distinguish possibilities; instead, they are part of the data to be explained. Indeed, a common thread in the writings of many robust normative realists is that the truth of moral realism is obvious, and that attempts to reduce ethical properties to something else fail.²⁰ As William FitzPatrick puts it, reductive views of ethical properties "secure the 'reality' of ethical facts and properties only by turning them into something else and deflating them in the process."²¹ That reductive meta-ethical views have this defect is a prominent theme of Derek Parfit's most recent work in meta-ethics.²² David Enoch presents a different kind of argument for robust normative realism. He suggests that irreducible normative properties are *deliberatively indispensable*, and that this constitutes a good reason to believe that such properties exist.²³ I do not claim that any of these proposals is correct. Rather, I claim that simply noting

¹⁷ See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch. 6.

¹⁸ Against a view like that of David Chalmers's, according to which phenomenal properties merely *naturally* supervene on physical properties, McGinn presses the complaint that such a view implies that qualia are epiphenomenal; see *Mysterious Flame*, pp. 25-27. McGinn argues that the materialist view that phenomenal properties are reducible to physical properties has different but also implausible implications; see *ibid.*, pp. 19-23.

¹⁹ Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*, p. 208.

²⁰ In addition to Huemer, see, for example, Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), chs. 2-3.

²¹ William FitzPatrick, "Robust Ethical Realism, Non-Naturalism, and Normativity," in Russ Shafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Volume 3* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 159-205, p. 159.

²² See Parfit, *On What Matters, Volumes I and II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Parts One and Six.

²³ Enoch, "Robust Metanormative Realism."

that such proposals imply the existence of redundant properties is not sufficient to refute them.

Brown briefly considers the possibility that “[a] property may have some other useful work to do...even if it does no work in distinguishing possibilities.”²⁴ But he considers only one way this might be true: the property in question might “figure inextricably in the best explanation of some phenomenon.”²⁵ As the discussion above illustrates, this is, at best, one of many proffered reasons to believe in redundant robust normative properties. Because Brown has nothing to say about the other reasons on offer, he has not provided good grounds for rejecting robust normative realism.²⁶

4. Simple and Complex Properties

Toward the end of his paper, Brown modifies his argument in light of the distinction between simple and complex properties:

We might think of properties as having a sort of internal structure which mirrors the syntactical structure of the predicates which denote them. So complex properties are built up from simple ones by means of operations analogous to negation, conjunction, and so on....[C]omplex properties are ontologically innocent. For example, once you've posited both the property of being red and the property of being square, you incur no further ontological debt by positing the property of being both red and square.²⁷

Brown accordingly replaces (3) with the weaker claim that no *simple* properties are redundant.²⁸ Let us consider the implications of this more modest claim with respect to theism and mysterianism. In connection with theism, consider the traditional doctrine of “divine simplicity.” According to this doctrine, “in God there are no distinctions whatsoever.”²⁹ Among the implications of this doctrine as it is traditionally understood are that God is identical to His essence, His existence and each of His properties (and hence all of

²⁴ Brown, “Supervenience Argument,” p. 213.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jackson, Kim and Brown argue that the supervenience of the normative on the nonnormative *entails* the reducibility of the former to the latter. Another kind of supervenience argument has it that the reducibility of the normative to the nonnormative helps to *explain* the relevant supervenience claim, and that this is *evidence* for the reducibility claim. For this other kind of argument, see Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 70-71.

²⁷ Brown, “Supervenience Argument,” p. 217.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Divine Simplicity,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 531-552, p. 531. Other useful contemporary discussions of divine simplicity include: Brian Leftow, “Is God an Abstract Object?”, *NOUS* 24 (1990): 581-98; William Vallicella, “Divine Simplicity,” in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/divine-simplicity>; and Jeffrey Brower, “Making Sense of Divine Simplicity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 25(1) (January 2008): 3-30.

these things are identical with each other).³⁰ Consequently: God has just one property, and He is identical to this property. Call this property *being God*. God is simple; the property of being God = God; therefore, the property of being God is simple. Moreover, the property of being God is redundant in Brown's sense.³¹ Of course, the doctrine of divine simplicity is both puzzling and controversial.³² However, advocates of the view have offered positive reasons in support of it that have nothing to do with distinguishing possibilities, so merely noting that the doctrine implies the existence of a simple yet redundant property is not sufficient to refute it.³³

In the case of mysterianism, McGinn emphasizes the simplicity of phenomenal properties: "[W]ith consciousness, a new kind of reality has been injected into the universe, instead of just a recombination of the old realities."³⁴ And, as I demonstrated in section 3 above, McGinn's view implies that phenomenal properties are redundant. Thus, traditional theism (including the doctrine of divine simplicity) and mysterianism both entail the instantiation of simple yet redundant properties. But this does not show that these views are false. The same holds for robust normative realism.³⁵

5. Conclusion

The mere fact that a given theory entails the instantiation of redundant properties does not imply that we should reject the theory. Nothing I have said here shows that robust normative realism is true. But those who wish to put

³⁰ Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," p. 532.

³¹ Consider every pair of worlds w_1 and w_2 that are indistinguishable with respect to at least all properties except the property *being God*. Given God's necessary existence and uniqueness, the property *being God* has the same extension in w_1 and w_2 . Brown's comments on indistinguishability make it clear that this is sufficient for w_1 and w_2 being indistinguishable with respect to *being God*, and hence *being God* satisfies Brown's definition of redundancy (see Brown, "Supervenience Argument," p. 211, n. 11).

³² For an influential contemporary critique of this doctrine, see Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980).

³³ For one argument in favor of divine simplicity, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Brothers Inc., 1947), I, q. 3, a. 7, p. 19.

³⁴ McGinn, *Mysterious Flame*, p. 13; see also pp. 58-59. McGinn says: "We may be able to analyze an experience phenomenologically, breaking it into its phenomenal parts, as when we say that an experience of a red sphere is composed of an experience of redness and an experience of sphericity" (p. 58). But on McGinn's view, every conscious experience is ultimately composed of phenomenal simples, which correspond to redundant properties – e.g., the property of having a red experience. These simple phenomenal properties are entailed by certain brain states, and hence are redundant.

³⁵ For an argument that at least some value properties cannot be "built up" from natural properties, see Graham Oddie, *Value, Reality, and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), ch. 6. Oddie's argument employs a theory of properties based on the concept of *convexity*; see pp. 152-58.

this view aside must look further than Brown's new supervenience argument.³⁶

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³⁶ Thanks to Jeffrey Dunn and an anonymous referee for *JESP* for their excellent comments on earlier versions of this paper.