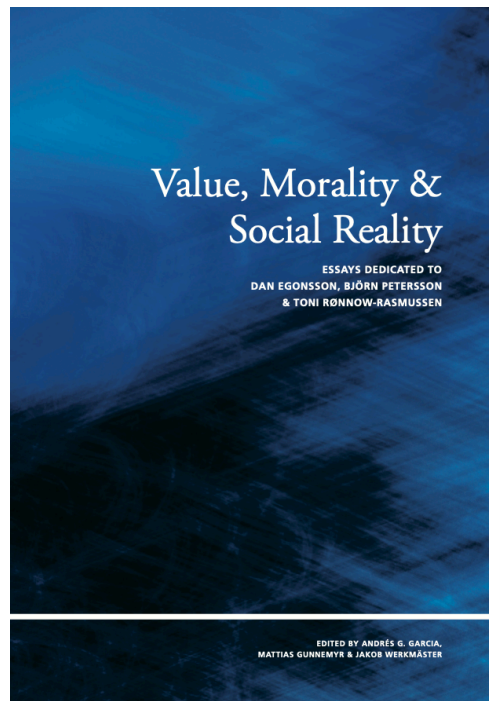


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Caj Strandberg

In: Garcia, A., Gunnemyr, M. & Werkmäster, J. (2023) *Value, Morality & Social Reality: Essays dedicated to Dan Egonsson, Björn Petersson & Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen*. Lund: Department of Philosophy, Lund University. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37852/oblu.189>

ISBN: 978-91-89415-65-2 (print), 978-91-89415-66-9 (digital)



Published by the Department of Philosophy, Lund University.
Edited by: Andrés Garcia, Mattias Gunnemyr, and Jakob Werkmäster
Cover image by Fabian Jones. Cover layout by Gunilla Albertén.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37852/oblu.189.c535>



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Tonicing Moral Supervenience

Caj Strandberg

Abstract. Inspired by a novel remark by Toni Rønnow Rasmussen, I compare realist and non-cognitivist accounts of the modality of moral supervenience. Toni's remark suggests that non-cognitivists face a critical choice: If they opt for weak supervenience, they have difficulties to account for the dependence of the moral on the non-moral. If they opt for strong supervenience, they have difficulties to account for the inner 'necessary'. However, non-cognitivism seems to have an important advantage: It can explain *why* the outer 'necessary' is analytical by reference to the function of moral language to influence behaviour. According to the preferred realist account of moral supervenience, it amounts to strong supervenience where the outer 'necessary' is analytical and the inner metaphysical. Most importantly, I argue that realism can explain *why* 'necessary' in moral supervenience needs to be understood in accordance with this view by reference to the connection between moral properties and normative reasons. Moreover, I argue that the realist account can be generalized to other normative properties and that it is part of an explanation of why moral language can have the function to influence behaviour. Thus, realism provides a superior account of the modality of moral supervenience as compared to non-cognitivism.

1. Introduction

In a wonderful metaphor, Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen observes that 'Values are not like butterflies that happen to settle on a flower' (Rønnow-Rasmussen (2006): 2).

The moral depends on the non-moral: It is necessarily the case that moral terms apply to objects because, or in virtue of, their having non-moral properties. It is generally agreed that a necessary condition for this dependency relation is that the moral supervenes on the non-moral. There agreement ends, however. In particular, it is commonly assumed that realism has difficulties to account for the modality of moral supervenience, whereas non-cognitivism is able to do so. In this paper, I compare realist and non-cognitivist views of moral supervenience. The result of the discussion is that the converse is the case: Realism provides a superior account of the modality of moral supervenience. Thus, the paper provides an argument for realism and against non-cognitivism based on supervenience.

2. Realism and Non-cognitivism

As I will understand *moral realism*, it amounts to three claims: **(i)** Cognitivism: Moral judgments consist in beliefs that ascribe moral properties to objects. **(ii)** Moral properties are instantiated such that some moral judgments are true. **(iii)** Moral properties are mind independent: Their nature is not counterfactually dependent merely on the mental attitudes of individual agents.¹

Thus understood, there are different versions of realism. On *reductionist realism*, moral properties are identical to non-moral properties, i.e. properties that can be fully defined without employing moral terms.² On *non-reductionist realism*, moral properties are not identical to non-moral properties thus understood. On *naturalist realism*, moral properties consist in natural properties. There are both reductionist and non-reductionist versions of naturalist realism.³ On *non-naturalist realism*, moral properties are *sui generis* and not identical to any other type of properties. In this paper, I use ‘realism’ to refer to the generic sense of realism rather than any particular version of it. Thus, my discussion applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to all the mentioned versions of realism.

As I will understand *moral non-cognitivism*, it amounts to two claims: **(i)**: Moral judgments do not consist in beliefs that ascribe moral properties to objects. **(ii)** Instead, moral judgments consist, wholly or partly, in non-cognitive attitudes, such as desires.

¹ I provide an account of mind independence in Strandberg (Forthcoming).

² For this understanding of non-moral properties, see e.g. Hare (1997: 64); Railton (1989: 160); Sayre-McCord (1997a: 281), and Timmons (1999: 48).

³ On *reductionist naturalism*, moral properties consist in natural properties that can be fully defined without employing moral terms. On *non-reductionist naturalism*, they consist in natural properties that cannot be thus defined.

3. The Importance of Moral Dependence

It is plausible to assume that a condition for being competent with the meaning of moral terms is to acknowledge that they apply to objects in virtue of their having non-moral properties. Assume that an agent makes statements indicating that she does not believe that an action being morally right depends on some of the action's non-moral properties. She is then committed to admitting that it would be correct to judge that the action is right even if it does not have any non-moral properties.⁴ More importantly, she is committed to admitting that two actions can differ as regards rightness in spite of not differing in any non-moral properties. We would presumably regard her statements as an indication that she is not linguistically competent with 'right'.

The competence with the meaning of moral terms involves other aspects than recognition of the mentioned dependence relation. However, some of these aspects are presumably to be explained with reference to it. Assume that an agent justifies her judgment that an action is right by citing some of its non-moral properties. She can then be understood as pointing at some non-moral properties in virtue of which 'right' is applicable. Similarly, consider an agent who maintains that the fact that a person is good explains why the person performed a certain action and then justifies the explanation by citing some of the person's non-moral properties. She can then be understood to point at some non-moral properties in virtue of which 'good' applies. These aspects underwrite how important it is for a metaethical view to be able to explain the dependence of the moral on the non-moral.

As indicated, it is common in philosophy to characterize dependence relations in terms of supervenience. However, while supervenience reasonably is a necessary condition for a dependence relation to hold, it might not be sufficient.⁵ In particular, supervenience might be insufficient to account for a metaphysically explanatory and asymmetrical aspect of the dependence relation between properties. Accordingly, it has recently been argued that the notion of grounding is needed to account for dependence, at least on non-naturalism.⁶ In this paper, I will consider moral supervenience on the assumption that it is necessary to account for moral dependence, but recognize that it might need to be supplemented by further notions so as to fulfil this task. Importantly, if my argument that non-cognitivism is unable to account for the modality of moral supervenience is correct, it follows that this view also is unable to account for moral dependence.

⁴ However, it might be objected that it is inconceivable, and hence not analytically possible, that there are objects that lack *any* non-moral properties.

⁵ However, see Strandberg (2008: 129–158).

⁶ See e.g. Rosen (2010: 109–135) and Leary (2017: 76–105).

4. Realist Supervenience

As realism maintains that moral judgments ascribe moral properties to objects, it can characterize moral supervenience directly by reference to connections between properties. Consider first:

Realist Weak Supervenience (RWS): It is necessary that, for any object x , and for any moral property M , if x is M , then there is some set of non-moral properties G (G_1, G_2, G_3, \dots) such that **(a)** x has G , and **(b)** for any object y , if y has G , then y is M .

The outer ‘necessary’ binds the formula as a whole.⁷ In weak supervenience, there is no inner ‘necessary’ that prefixes the implication in **(b)**. Thus, it does not extend to all possible worlds. Consider next:

Realist Strong Supervenience (RSS): It is necessary that, for any object x , and for any moral property M , if x is M , then there is some set of non-moral properties G (G_1, G_2, G_3, \dots) such that **(a)** x has G , and **(b)** it is necessary that, for any object y , if y has G , then y is M .

As before, the outer ‘necessary’ binds the formula as a whole. In strong supervenience, there is an inner ‘necessary’ that prefixes the implication in **(b)**. Thus, it says that it holds in all possible worlds that any object which has G has M .

It is plausible to think that realists should opt for strong supervenience rather than weak. The primary reason is that weak supervenience is too weak to be part of an account of the notion that the moral depends on the non-moral.⁸ Assume that we want to claim that an action is right because it has a certain set of non-moral properties G . Weak supervenience merely states that *within* a possible world any action that has G is right. This indicates that, on weak supervenience, it would be mistaken to claim that an action is right because it is G , since an action *could* have G and yet not be right. In that case, the co-instantiation of rightness and G does not seem to be a matter of dependence, but rather coincidence: actions that have G *happen* to be right. Strong supervenience provides the required supplement by stating that it holds in all possible worlds that any action that has G is right.

Furthermore, much of our moral thinking is constituted by thought experiments. Assume that one wonders whether the fact that an action causes happiness is relevant as to whether it is right. One might then ask if the action would be right in a possible world where it does not cause happiness. We often trust the results of such thought experiments and let our moral decisions be guided by them. However, if only weak supervenience is the case, thought experiments would not be of any

⁷ For ease of exposition, I will refer to ‘outer’ ‘necessary’ also when discussing weak supervenience.

⁸ Cf. Kim (1993 (1990): 143–144). See also e.g. Blackburn (1993 (1985): 132); Dreier (2015: 275–276), and Franzén (Forthcoming: 7–8).

help, since we would not be justified to hold beliefs about one possible world based on what we believe about other possible worlds. For example, we would not be justified to believe that causing happiness contributes, or fails to contribute, to actions being right in the same way in our world as it does in the possible worlds employed in our thought experiments. However, on strong supervenience we would be justified to trust the result of such thought experiments, since what is the case in one world extends to other worlds.

It might next be asked how the two occurrences of ‘necessary’ in strong supervenience should be interpreted. As noticed, it is a requirement on being competent with the meaning of moral terms to acknowledge that they apply in virtue of objects having non-moral properties. Thus, it is generally agreed that the outer ‘necessary’ needs to be understood as analytical necessity. By contrast, it does not seem plausible to understand the inner ‘necessary’ in this manner. One reason is it does not seem to be a matter of linguistic competence to know about a set of non-moral properties *G* that if an object has *G*, it is right. Another reason is that some instances of necessary implications from non-moral properties to moral properties constitute moral principles. However, it might be argued that such principles cannot be analytically necessary, since it would mean that they would lack normativity. Instead, it seems more plausible to think that the inner ‘necessary’ should be understood as metaphysical necessity. I will return to these points.

5. Non-cognitivist Supervenience

According to non-cognitivism, moral judgments do not ascribe moral properties to objects, but consist in non-cognitive attitudes. As a result, it cannot characterize moral supervenience by reference to any metaphysical relation between properties. Instead, it is accounted for in terms of the connection between an agent’s moral attitudes and her beliefs about what non-moral properties objects have. It is maintained that to be competent with the meaning of moral terms, an agent needs to be consistent in having the same moral attitude towards objects that she believes have the same non-moral properties.⁹

It is rarely stated clearly how moral supervenience should be understood according to non-cognitivism.¹⁰ In what follows, I suggest ways of stating moral supervenience on this view. Assume that an agent’s moral judgment to the effect that *x* is right consists in her having moral attitude *M* towards *x*. Weak supervenience might be formulated as follows:

⁹ See e.g. Hare (1952: 131–134) and Blackburn (1993 (1985): 136–137, 146).

¹⁰ But see Gibbard (2003: 90). However, Gibbard’s formulation is concerned with his particular version of non-cognitivism.

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Non-Cognitivist Weak Supervenience (NWS): It is necessary that, for any object x , and for any agent S , if S has moral attitude M towards x , then there is some set of non-moral properties G (G_1, G_2, G_3, \dots) such that **(a)** S has attitude M towards x because she believes that x has G , and **(b)** for any object y , if S believes that y has G , then S has attitude M towards y .

Similarly, strong supervenience can be formulated as follows:

Non-Cognitivist Strong Supervenience (NSS): It is necessary that, for any object x , and for any agent S , if S has moral attitude M towards x , then there is some set of non-moral properties G (G_1, G_2, G_3, \dots) such that **(a)** S has attitude M towards x because she believes that x has G , and **(b)** it is necessary that for any object y , if S believes that y has G , then S has attitude M towards y .

It follows on both versions that in case an agent does not comply with them, she does not make a moral judgment, since she does not have a moral attitude of which such a judgment is constituted.

We might now query whether non-cognitivists should adopt weak or strong supervenience. Importantly, in this regard non-cognitivists face a critical choice. As far as I know, Rønnow-Rasmussen was first to pay attention to it:

The real crux of the matter concerns therefore how a prescriptivist would account for the second necessity operator in the strong supervenience thesis. It is one thing to claim that in endorsing V_a [an object a having value V] we commit ourselves by conceptual necessity to subscribe to a principle like the one in premise p [for all x , if Nx , then Vx]. It is quite another thing to say that endorsing V_a commits you, by conceptual necessity, to subscribe to a principle that in part expresses that there holds a necessity relation between certain natural properties and a certain value property. The latter claim squares badly with his idea that value terms have no fixed descriptive content. (Rønnow-Rasmussen (2006: 8))¹¹

In the frame of the present discussion, we can formulate the choice in the following manner. *On the one hand*, non-cognitivists have reason to adopt strong supervenience. Contemporary non-cognitivists generally concede that realism in many respects seems to be in line with how we talk and think about morality. Consequently, they try to save as much as possible of the appearance of realism while arguing that, ultimately, non-cognitivism is to be preferred.¹² As we have seen, realism should adopt strong supervenience to capture the notion that the moral depends on the non-moral. Thus, insofar as non-cognitivists aim to account for this notion in a way that accords with our conception of it, they should adopt strong

¹¹ Cf. Dreier (2015: 289–290), and Franzén (Forthcoming: 8). See also Rønnow-Rasmussen (1993: 142–151). Rønnow-Rasmussen's discussion is concerned with Hare's prescriptivism, but applies to non-cognitivism in general.

¹² See e.g. Blackburn (1984: Ch. 6) and (1993 (1988): 166–181).

supervenience. In case they do not, they need to provide a particular argument why weak supervenience should be preferred to strong. *On the other hand*, it is difficult for non-cognitivism to adopt strong supervenience. As we have seen, there are reasons to understand the inner ‘necessary’ as metaphysical rather than analytical necessity. A metaphysical necessary connection is a connection that holds between properties or facts. For example, an account of why it is metaphysically necessary that if an object has certain properties, it has a certain other property, is provided by reference to the nature of the properties referred to in the antecedent. However, non-cognitivists explain moral supervenience in terms of the connection between attitudes and beliefs about non-moral properties. Consequently, it is difficult to see that they can understand the inner ‘necessary’ as metaphysical necessity.¹³ It appears that the only remaining alternative is to interpret it as analytical necessity, which appears implausible for reasons mentioned above. In that case, it might be more plausible for non-cognitivists to refuse strong supervenience and argue for weak supervenience.

We have already touched on how non-cognitivists understand the outer ‘necessary’ in moral supervenience. They maintain that to be competent with the meaning of a moral term, an agent needs to be consistent in her moral attitudes in a manner complying with supervenience. Thus, as Rønnow-Rasmussen observes, they understand the outer ‘necessary’ as analytical necessity.

It was argued above that non-cognitivists face a critical choice as to whether they should opt from weak or strong supervenience. However, non-cognitivism seems to have a crucial advantage over a realist account of moral supervenience: It is able to explain *why* the outer ‘necessary’ needs to be understood as analytical necessity. A plausible idea motivating non-cognitivism is that an essential function of moral language is to influence attitudes and actions.¹⁴ It is reasonable to argue that in order for moral language to fulfil this function, it needs to be a condition on linguistic competence that we are consistent in our attitudes in a way conforming to supervenience.

To summarize: There are good reasons for realists to adopt strong supervenience where the outer ‘necessary’ is analytical and the inner metaphysical necessity. Because realists opt for strong supervenience, they are in the position to account for

¹³ It might perhaps be argued that non-cognitivists can employ a deflationary view of metaphysical necessity to account for the inner ‘necessary’. On this view, it does not involve any ‘worldly’ metaphysical relation between properties that is incompatible with non-cognitivism. I do not have space to evaluate this important suggestion in the present paper, but will merely make two comments. First, I doubt that a deflationary view of metaphysical necessity is able to capture the contention that moral principles are substantive, and hence non-linguistic, as I will argue in the next section. The reason is that non-cognitivists seem committed to explaining a deflationary notion of metaphysical necessity ultimately in linguistic terms. Second, it would be incompatible with one of the main arguments for non-cognitivism which relies on weak supervenience (Blackburn (1993 (1985): 166–181).

¹⁴ See e.g. Blackburn (1984: 186) and (1993 (1985): 137).

the notion that the moral depends on the non-moral. Non-cognitivists face a crucial choice. If they opt for weak supervenience, they have difficulties to account for the notion that the moral depends on the non-moral. If they opt for strong supervenience, they have difficulties to account for the inner ‘necessary’. However, non-cognitivism seems to have an important advantage over realism in that it can explain *why* the outer ‘necessary’ in moral supervenience needs to be analytical.

In the remainder of the paper, I argue that realism can explain *why* ‘necessary’ in moral supervenience needs to be read in accordance with this view. Moreover, I suggest that this view is generalizable to other normative properties and that it is part of an explanation why moral language can have the function to influence attitudes and actions.

6. A Realist Explanation of the Modality of Moral Supervenience

According to non-cognitivism, moral judgments consist in non-cognitive attitudes. As we express our moral judgments and thereby our moral attitudes in using moral language, it can have the function to influence attitudes and actions. In Simon Blackburn’s view, moral language has the function of influencing other people to have the same attitudes as we do so as to coordinate our attitudes and thereby our actions.¹⁵ In order for it to have that function, we need to be consistent in our moral attitudes.¹⁶ As a result, to be linguistically competent with the meaning of moral terms, an agent needs to adhere to moral supervenience by being consistent in having the same moral attitude towards objects that she believes have the same non-moral properties. Hence, the outer ‘necessary’ in moral supervenience amounts to analytical necessity.

According to realism, by contrast, moral judgments do not consist in non-cognitive attitudes. It therefore seems that it cannot explain *why* the outer ‘necessary’ in moral supervenience is analytically necessary by referring to the mentioned function of moral language. Moreover, this explanation seems to square badly with understanding the inner ‘necessary’ as metaphysical necessity. Thus, it might be argued that while non-cognitivism has a straightforward explanation of their understanding of ‘necessary’ in moral supervenience, realism lacks such an account.

However, I think realists are in the position to provide an explanation of *why* ‘necessary’ in moral supervenience is to be understood in the manner they suggest.

¹⁵ See e.g. Blackburn (1998: 68–69). Cf. Hare (1952: 131–134) and Gibbard (2003: 56, 89–94).

¹⁶ However, these assumptions can be questioned. See e.g. Zangwill (1997: 510–511); Sturgeon (2009: 83–88), and Atiq (578–599).

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In my view, realists can provide such an explanation by reference to the connection between moral properties and reasons. Moreover, this account is available to all versions of realism. The basic idea is this: The outer ‘necessary’ is analytical because the meaning of a sentence to the effect that an object has a moral property entails that there is some *moral reason*, where such a reason is constituted by non-moral properties on which the moral property strongly supervenes. The inner ‘necessary’ is metaphysical because *moral principles*, in the form of implications from non-moral properties constituting moral reasons to moral properties, are *substantive*. The account rests on three claims that I will consider in turn.

First, a normative standard exhibits an analytically necessary connection between normative properties and normative reasons. One instance of this connection is the following:

Moral Property→*Moral Reason*: It is analytically necessary that if an object *x* has a moral property *M*, then there is a moral reason pertaining to *x*.

There are several instances of this connection. For example: If it is morally right to perform an action, then there is a moral reason to perform that action.

It should be uncontroversial that morality is a normative standard that exemplifies this connection between normative properties and reasons. Indeed, terms denoting moral properties, such as ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’, and ‘bad’, are frequently used to entail that there is moral reason (not) to perform certain actions or (not) to have certain attitudes.

Second, on realism it is analytically necessary that moral reasons are constituted by the supervenience base of moral properties:

Moral Reason/Supervenience: It is analytically necessary that a moral reason is constituted by a set of non-moral properties *G* on which a moral property *M* strongly supervenes.

There are several instances of this claim. For example: A moral reason to do what is morally right is constituted by a set of non-moral properties on which moral rightness strongly supervenes.

The present claim should not be understood to entail that a moral reason is constituted by *all* the non-properties included in a set of non-moral properties on which a moral property strongly supervenes. For instance, such a set might include properties on which rightness supervenes but that do not make up parts of a moral reason to do what is right. One example is ‘enablers’: properties that do not constitute reasons but which are relevant for whether an agent has a reason.¹⁷ Hence, the claim is compatible with a moral reason to do what is right being constituted by a *subset* of the non-moral properties on which rightness strongly supervenes.

¹⁷ Cf. Strandberg (2008: 138–147).

It should be uncontroversial that realism is committed to this connection between moral reasons and the supervenience base of moral properties. There are both intuitive and more formal grounds for this contention. The intuitive ground: A reason to do what is right consists in some feature of the action that ‘makes’ it right or ‘in virtue’ of which it is right. Similarly, an action is right ‘because’ there is a reason to perform it. Now, terms like ‘make’, ‘in virtue of’, and ‘because’ denote a dependence relation between moral properties and underlying properties that realists try to capture by strong supervenience. The more formal ground: It is analytically necessary that if an action is morally right, then there is a moral reason to perform the action. On realism, the property of being right depends, and hence strongly supervenes, on a set of non-moral properties. It then seems very plausible to think that a moral reason consists of some set of non-moral properties. Thus, on realism a moral reason to do what is right is constituted by a set of non-moral properties on which rightness strongly supervenes.

There is a further ground to accept the claim above based on the notion of normative explanation: An explanation of why an object has a certain normative property, for instance why an action has the property of being morally right. Pekka Väyrynen has argued, convincingly in my view, that normative explanations are subject to a ‘justification condition’. Applied to the present example, this condition implies that a normative explanation of why an action is right needs to identify some feature of the action that provides a normative reason to perform it.¹⁸ Väyrynen does not explicitly comment on moral supervenience. However, it is plausible to assume that a normative explanation of why an action is right refers to non-moral properties on which rightness depends and hence strongly supervenes.

Third, moral principles are substantive:

Moral Principles are Substantive: A moral principle of the form ‘If x has a set of non-moral properties G, where G constitutes a moral reason pertaining to x, then x has a moral property M’ is not analytically necessary but metaphysically necessary.¹⁹

A simple example of a moral principle of this form would be the following: ‘If an action maximizes happiness, then it is morally right’. In the present paper, I do not commit myself to this or any other moral principle.

As mentioned, it is plausible to think that a moral principle of the relevant type refers to a set of non-moral properties which constitutes a moral reason to do what is morally right. However, it is implausible to think that such a principle is

¹⁸ Väyrynen (2021b: 3–22). See also Väyrynen (2021a: 278–927).

¹⁹ It should be noticed that in the present sense of ‘moral principle’, the existence of such principles is compatible with particularism. A moral principle, as this notion is used here, merely constitutes a necessary implication from a set of non-moral properties, comprising a moral reason, to a moral property. The set might be very complex and the properties in it interact in ways maintained by particularists. Cf. Strandberg (2008: 129–158).

analytically necessary. First, it does not seem to be part of competence with the meaning of 'right' to know that there is an implication from a given set of non-moral properties to rightness. Second, and more controversially, it might be argued that such principles cannot be analytically necessary, since it would imply that they lack normativity. Assume that moral principles are analytically necessary. In that case, it would be a matter of the meaning of 'right' that such a principle is true: We use 'right' in such a way that if an action has a particular set of non-moral properties, it is correct to apply 'right' to it. However, whether we have a moral reason to perform actions that have certain non-moral properties does not seem to be a matter of meaning of words. Instead, it is a matter of the nature of the non-moral properties in question. In the example above, it is the nature of maximizing happiness which would explain why it is the case that if an action has this non-moral property, there is moral reason to perform it. If this is correct, there are grounds to think that moral principles need to be metaphysically rather than analytically necessary.

Advocates of realism are now in the position to provide an explanation of *why* 'necessary' in moral supervenience should be understood in accordance with this view. That the outer 'necessary' is analytical necessity follows from the connection between moral properties and reasons, and from moral reasons being constituted by non-moral properties on which moral properties strongly supervene. That the inner 'necessary' is metaphysical necessity follows from moral principles being metaphysically necessary. In more detail: According to *Moral Property*→*Moral Reason*, it is analytically necessary that if an object *x* has a moral property *M*, then there is a moral reason pertaining to *x*. According to *Moral Reason/Supervenience*, it is analytically necessary that a moral reason is constituted by a set of non-moral properties *G* on which *M* strongly supervenes. It follows that the outer 'necessary' amounts to analytical necessity. According to *Moral Principles are Substantive*, moral principles are not analytically but metaphysically necessary. A moral principle maintains that if an object has a set of non-moral properties *G*, which constitutes a moral reason pertaining to *x*, then *x* has a moral property *M*. It follows that the inner 'necessary' amounts to metaphysical necessity.

As indicated, this account of the modality of moral supervenience is available to all forms of realism mentioned above. However, it is worth mentioning that it might have implications for a certain argument against non-naturalism. One objection against this view is that it is unable to account for the supervenience of *sui generis* moral properties on non-moral properties. It is important to distinguish between different versions of this argument. On one version, there cannot be any necessary connection between properties that belong to entirely distinct types. On another version, non-naturalism is unable to account for the modality of the supervenience of moral properties on non-moral properties because moral properties are *sui generis* on this view. The above account does not offer any response to the first argument. However, it might provide a response to the second one. There does not seem to be any reasons to think that the modality of the supervenience of moral properties on non-moral properties is different because the former are conceived of as *sui generis*.

The reasoning above, motivating why the outer ‘necessary’ is analytical and the inner metaphysical, seems applicable irrespective of whether moral properties are understood as *sui generis* or not.

7. Unifying the Normative Sphere

In the last section, I argued that realism can explain *why* ‘necessary’ in moral supervenience should be understood in the manner proposed by this view. Now I would like to briefly indicate that the realist account of moral supervenience has a significant advantage over the non-cognitivist: The realist account can, in contrast to the non-cognitivist alternative, unify the normative sphere by being generalized to other normative properties. The same type of problems that non-cognitivists have of accounting for moral supervenience are bound to arise regarding supervenience in relation to other types of normative notions. For example, for basically the same reasons as those indicated above, non-cognitivism about aesthetic value will face difficulties to explain how aesthetic value depends, and hence strongly supervenes, on non-aesthetic properties. Moreover, it is not evident that all uses of normative language have the function to influence attitudes and actions. By contrast, it is plausible to argue that all sentences that ascribe a normative property to an object entail the existence of some reason that is constituted by a set of non-normative properties on which the normative property strongly supervenes. Hence, there are grounds to think that the realist account of moral supervenience is generalizable to other normative properties.

8. Explaining the Function of Moral Language

The non-cognitivist explanation of *why* the outer ‘necessary’ in moral supervenience amounts to analytical necessity is that it is needed to account for the function of moral language to influence attitudes and actions. It should be clear that realism is not committed to the claim that moral language has such a function. However, it is possible for realists to concede that moral language does have this function and then argue that *their* preferred reading of ‘necessary’ is needed for moral language to fulfil it. While non-cognitivists explain this function by referring to the meaning of moral sentences, realists can account for it by referring to the pragmatics of moral utterances. I have defended this view in other contexts and will only indicate the contours of it here.²⁰

²⁰ For a full defence, see Strandberg (2012: 87–122).

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The realist account rests on three assumptions. First, conversations about moral matters generally have the mutually accepted purpose to communicate moral beliefs about which actions are right and wrong. Second, such conversations generally have the further mutually accepted purpose to influence attitudes and actions. Third, a sentence like ‘X is right’ entails that there is moral reason to perform the action in question. In view of the two purposes of moral conversations, it is plausible to assume that utterances of the type ‘X is right’ standardly conversationally implicates that the utterer has a favourable attitude towards the action being performed. The basic explanation is that it does not seem to be any *point* in uttering a sentence which entails that there is moral reason to perform an action in a moral conversation which has as a mutually accepted purpose to influence behaviour unless one has a favourable attitude towards it being carried out.²¹ As moral utterances standardly conversationally implicate positive or negative attitudes towards actions, they can have the function to influence attitudes and actions.

It is plausible to argue that for moral language to fulfil this function, ‘necessary’ in moral supervenience needs to be understood as suggested by realism. First, it needs to be analytically necessary that a sentence like ‘X is right’ entails that there is a moral reason to perform the action. If this were not the case, an utterance to the effect that an action is right made in a moral conversation which has a mutually accepted purpose to influence behaviour would not entail that there is moral reason to perform it. Second, this moral reason needs to be constituted by a set of non-moral properties on which rightness strongly supervenes. If this were not the case, the fact that an agent performs the action that she, according to the utterance, has moral reason to perform would not guarantee that she performs an action that is right. In case this condition is not fulfilled, the utterance would then not be effective in influencing people to perform such actions in various possible circumstances. Thus, it should be clear that both these conditions need to be fulfilled in order for moral utterances to have the function to influence attitudes and actions. Moreover, there are grounds to think that moral principles need to be synthetically rather than analytically necessary. The crucial point is this: A part of the realist account of why moral language can have the function to influence attitudes and actions is that moral utterances entail the existence of moral reasons in accordance with the realist view of moral supervenience, where the first ‘necessary’ is analytical and the second metaphysical.

²¹ It might be objected that it need not be awkward to utter a sentence which entails that there is a moral reason to perform an action without having any favourable attitude towards it, since it might be merely a *pro tanto* moral reason. However, I think it would be awkward to utter such a sentence in the absence of a favourable attitude unless the utterance is accompanied by an additional utterance which modifies it, in which case the implicature of the original utterance is cancelled. After all, there seems to be little point in uttering a sentence which entails that there is even a *pro tanto* moral reason to perform an action in a context with the mentioned purposes unless one has the relevant attitude.

9. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have argued that moral realism provides an account of the modality of moral supervenience that is superior to the one offered by moral non-cognitivism. Realists should maintain that moral supervenience amounts to strong supervenience where the outer ‘necessary’ is analytical and the inner metaphysical. As it is strong supervenience, it can be part of an account of the notion that the moral depends on the non-moral. Most importantly, realists can explain *why* ‘necessary’ should be understood in this manner that is available to all versions of this view. Furthermore, this account is generalizable to other normative properties. In addition, it is part of an explanation of why moral language can have the function of influencing attitudes and actions. Non-cognitivism has a difficult choice. If it opts for weak supervenience, it cannot account for the notion that the moral depends on the non-moral. If it opts for strong supervenience, it cannot account for the inner occurrence of ‘necessary’. Non-cognitivism might seem to have an advantage in being able to explain *why* the outer ‘necessary’ is analytical. However, the realist account is superior for the reasons indicated above.²²

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²² I am indebted to two anonymous referees for value comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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