Shafer-Landau's defense against Blackburn's supervenience argument
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Abstract

Within meta-ethics one influential argument against moral realism is the so called *supervenience argument* credited to Simon Blackburn. The argument aims to show that anti-realism (and in Blackburn's case projectivism) has an explanatory advantage over realism. The mystery that the moral realists are challenged to explain is why moral supervenience is a conceptual truth if we are to endorse the lack of entailment thesis. This explanation requirement is commonly called: the need to explain the ban of mixed worlds. The moral realist and non-naturalist Russ Shafer-Landau offers a defense against the supervenience argument. The strategies he uses to defend his theory against this argument are to show that if the argument is successful we are forced to embrace global anti-realism, to claim that we should abandon the lack of entailment thesis and to argue that no explanation is needed. A conclusion of this essay is that the realist and non-naturalist Shafer-Landau's defense strategy with most potential, is to claim that there is no need for an explanation.

1. Introduction

In this essay I will discuss the anti-realist Simon Blackburn's so called *supervenience argument* and a defense against the argument presented by the realist Russ Shafer-Landau. The conclusion of the supervenience argument is that moral realists have a problem with respect to supervenience. Here the realist Shafer-Landau's theory on supervenience will be brought to light and analyzed in terms of how good of a defense it provides against Blackburn's supervenience argument. To understand the debate it is important to grasp the notion of supervenience and to know some of the background behind the argument. These two topics will be handled in this introduction section. In the next section 2. *Blackburn's supervenience argument* there is a presentation of the two premises, what mystery Blackburn claims is in need of an explanation and why his conclusions are troublesome specifically for realism. Shafer-Landau's three defense strategies are then presented one by one in 3. *Shafer-Landau's defense*. Firstly it will be explained how he tries to show that the conclusion of Blackburn's argument forces us to choose between global anti-realism (accepting an anti-realistic view on colors, the mental and other such domains) or accepting that there is no explanatory failure. After that follows a presentation of the second strategy in which he argues that one of the two premises behind the supervenience argument (the lack of entailment thesis) should be abandoned. Next in this section there is a presentation of the third strategy where he argues that there is no need for an explanation. After these sections where Blackburn's and Shafer-Landau's theories have been presented and their differences have been made clear follows 4. *Discussion*. The question of how
well Shafer-Landau's defense can stand up against the supervenience argument is the main focus in the discussion section. The fruit of this essay will then be summarized in the ending section 5. **Conclusions.**

1.1 The notion of supervenience

The meaning of the term supervenience varies a great deal between the writers within the philosophical discipline and there is not one definition that can capture how all philosophers use the term. However there is an intuitive idea behind the notion of supervenience. The idea is that there is a special kind of relation between certain properties. Perhaps the easiest example of supervening properties is colors. Let us say that an object is red, then the property redness has a specific relation to the underlying physical properties of the object. If the physical properties were different the object might be yellow. Incorporated in this idea is the thought that the color property can not differ if there is no difference in the physical properties. If the physical properties stay the same we can not go from judging the object to be red to judging the object to be yellow. There is some kind of dependency relation between the color properties and the physical properties. Here is one definition of supervenience offered by Shafer-Landau.

... the supervenience claim says that, necessarily, if anything possessing base properties B* also possesses S, and is S in virtue of being B*, then (in that world) anything else that is also B* must be S. (Shafer-Landau, 1994, p. 152)

It is however important to keep in mind that this is only one definition from one of the acting parties in this essay. This definition of supervenience should not be seen as a constant that can be used in all parts of this essay. I present it here as an aid to help understand the general notion of supervenience.

So far we have looked at the intuitive idea behind the notion of supervenience in general. Since this essay deals with meta-ethics the kind of supervenience relation that will be in focus is that between moral properties and non-moral properties. Here is an example of how the moral can be thought to supervene on the non-moral. Imagine that you are faced with two equal acts, for example donations to charity. The two acts are equal in the sense that they share the same non-moral properties, and if described in non-moral terms they are the same. The intuitive thought is that you (and everybody else) must judge that there is no difference in the moral status of the two acts. Suppose you say that one of the two acts is morally wrong and the other one is morally right. If you say that you seem to commit some kind of mistake since you give two non-morally equivalent acts different moral
evaluations. Our intuitive idea behind moral supervenience is that if two acts receive different moral judgments they must differ in some non-moral way. There must be at least some difference that can be expressed in non-moral terms, for example a person's intention. In short our intuition says that there cannot be a difference in the moral without a difference in the non-moral. Hereinafter when I use the term moral supervenience I am referring to this kind of dependency relation, namely that moral properties supervene on non-moral properties.

Before moving on to the next part of this section I have some general remarks regarding the notion of supervenience. These things might be useful in the reading of this essay. So far it has been established that supervenience is a dependency relation. The relation can be thought to hold between different facts, properties or sets of properties. Clearly it should define a relation that other terms do not capture. It is for example not a causal dependency relation. To clarify: if a moral property F supervenes on the non-moral property G their relation is not constituted by G being the causal force for F. It should also be noted that supervenience takes many forms in the philosophical literature. One sometimes distinguishes between for example, strong, weak, global, specific and general supervenience claims. However I have judged that these different forms of supervenience will not be needed in order to understand the arguments in this essay.

1.2 The contextual and meta-ethical background

One of the main characters in this essay is the British philosopher Simon Blackburn. In the book Spreading the word (1984) his ambition is to introduce philosophy of language to a wider audience. He expresses a concern that these important and influential philosophical questions are inaccessible. In this book he introduces the supervenience argument that will be in the spotlight of the discussion in this essay. In 1993 Blackburn released his third book titled Essays in Quasi-realism. In the introduction of this book he paints a picture of a divided philosophical landscape. On the one hand there are realists and on the other hand there are anti-realists. One main problem for the anti-realists is to make sense of moral language and thought expressing judgments whose correctness is thought to be independent of the judgment itself. In other words, that we tend to think and speak as though our moral judgments are right or wrong and their correctness is not depending on attitudes or feelings. Blackburn's quest is to present a theory that is not a realist theory, but can make sense of our thoughts and language that includes the concepts of objectivity and truth. Therefore Blackburn lands in a position called quasi-realism. In the essays Moral realism and Supervenience Revisited Blackburn offers an updated formulation of the supervenience argument in hopes of showing that this type of anti-realism is to prefer over realism. The realist and non-naturalist Shafer-Landau has
at different occasions answered to the challenge set up by Blackburn. In the article *Supervenience and Moral Realism* (1994) he presents the three defense strategies that will be discussed in this essay. His defense is developed further in his book *Moral Realism: A Defence* (2003) and the article *Replies to critics* (2005).

A short description of how the realists and anti-realists differ might be in order. Theories within moral realism claim that (i) moral judgments are beliefs about moral facts, (ii) moral facts exist, which means that moral judgments can be true or false (Sayre-McCord, 2011, Introduction). A third claim can be added to separate realists from relativists; (iii) the moral facts are objective in the sense of being independent of our values and attitudes. It should be noted that realist believe that moral facts are independent in the way that they do not exist in virtue of our values and attitudes. It is however possible that the description of what is right, wrong, good and evil involve values and attitudes. Anti-realist theories have in common that they reject at least one of the three claims above. However which specific claim is rejected depends on what kind of anti-realist theory it is. Non-cognitivists reject (i) and might for example hold that moral judgments are attitudes. They can possibly argue that attitudes cannot be true or false since attitudes do not aim to represent a condition in the world. Error-theorists reject (ii), and thereby claim that although moral judgments are beliefs, the moral judgments can never be true (therein lays the error). Relativists on the other hand reject (iii) and say that moral judgments are beliefs and they can be true, but that they are in some way true in virtue of our values and attitudes. Blackburn is in this sense an anti-realist and non-cognitivist since moral judgments according to him are projections and not a belief that can represent the world in either a successful or unsuccessful way.

Furthermore there is a distinction within moral realism between ethical naturalism and ethical non-naturalism. Shafer-Landau, who is a non-naturalist, here explains the background of the distinction between naturalism and non-naturalism in meta-ethics:

… it is hard to see what kind of thing moral value could be, and this difficulty derives largely from the suspicion that values are something quite different from the commonplace, empirical facts that we encounter in our everyday experience. It is said that values have a pull on us that ordinary facts do not; that values are not discoverable as scientific facts are; that values provide justification for practices that plain facts are unable, by themselves, to supply. In short, it appears that moral values are something very different in kind from anything that we are familiar with. (Shafer-Landau, 2003, p. 55)

There are three basic, alternative ways to deal with these notions according to Shafer-Landau.
Either (as Shafer-Landau himself does) we take them seriously and claim that moral values have a place in our ontology as a separate category of facts. The other two alternatives discredit the notions in the quote above in two different ways. Firstly as non-cognitivists do, we can deny the reality of the moral realm and in that way explain why our notion about moral values are different from other facts. Secondly as naturalists do, we can deny the distinctness of the moral realm and claim that moral values have a place in our ontology as a kind of scientific fact. In this sense both naturalists and non-naturalists claim that the moral realm is part of the reality but the latter claim that the moral facts are distinct from other facts. (Shafer-Landau, 2003, p. 55)

The non-naturalists are said to have a bigger problem with supervenience than the naturalists. That is because according to the non-naturalists the moral properties are not natural properties. So the moral and the non-moral properties do not have the same ontological status and are distinct types of existences. According to the moral supervenience claim there is a necessary relation between these distinct types of existences. That causes a problem for the non-naturalists to explain moral supervenience.

For if moral properties and natural properties really are, in Hume's terms, “distinct existences” then it is hard to see why it should be impossible for the former to differ with no difference in the latter and since the natural properties are non-moral ones (given non-naturalism) this makes supervenience seem problematic. (Ridge, 2014, Chapter 6)

Why do naturalists escape this problem? According to naturalism moral properties are natural ones. Which means that the moral properties and natural properties are not distinct types of existences. It is not problematic to see how existences of the same kind can have a supervenience relation. We can thereby conclude that naturalists do not face this problem regarding distinct existences. And trying to explain moral supervenience is, in this regard, more troublesome for non-naturalists like Shafer-Landau.

In this introduction of the philosophers and their theories, my intention has been to lay out the contextual background for the supervenience argument. To describe the basic differences between the meta-ethical positions. And explain why especially non-naturalists are thought to have a problem with respect to supervenience. The non-naturalist Shafer-Landau's answer to the supervenience argument is thereby an (extra) interesting reply. In the next section follows a presentation of Blackburn's argument.
2. Blackburn's supervenience argument

The supervenience argument formulated by Blackburn is grounded on two theses that can be seen as premises. In 2.1 the two premises will be presented, in 2.2 follows an explanation of what Blackburn thinks need to be explained and in 2.3 it will be discussed why the supervenience argument is thought to pose a problem especially troublesome for realists.

2.1 Moral supervenience and the lack of entailment thesis

Blackburn's supervenience argument is based on the following two premises:

1: It is a conceptual truth that moral properties supervene on non-moral properties.
2: There is no moral property F and non-moral description G* such that it is a conceptual truth that for all x, if x is G* then x is F.

Premise 1 will be referred to as the moral supervenience thesis and premise 2 as the lack of entailment thesis. We will now take a look at what the theses mean and why they are thought to be plausible. The general supervenience claim can according to Blackburn be understood as follows: “… as a matter of necessity, if something x is F, and G* underlies this, then anything else in the physical or natural (or whatever) state G* is F as well.” (Blackburn, 1993, p. 131). As you can see this claim is universal for supervenience and not specific for the moral domain. Accordingly the moral supervenience claim could be understood as the claim that if something x has some moral property F, and the non-moral state G* underlies this, then necessarily anything else in the state G* is F as well. As you can see in the first premise Blackburn holds moral supervenience as a conceptual truth. Simply put, a conceptual truth means that something is true in virtue of the concepts and terms involved. That means that you (and everyone else who is a competent speaker) can realize that it is true if you understand the concepts and terms expressed in the statement. You would not need some special kind of experience or some other kind of knowledge to realize it. The following quote from James Dreier's article The supervenience argument against moral realism (1992) can help us to understand what it would mean to deny that moral supervenience is a conceptual truth.

For if it were false, then there might be two people who were just alike in all natural respects but who differed in some moral way. That seems very implausible, and it is precisely what Blackburn wants to say is ruled out by our moral concepts. (Dreier, 1992, p. 15)

So the first premise in Blackburn's argument is that it is a conceptual truth that there cannot be a difference in the moral without a difference in the non-moral.
But according to Blackburn there is no non-moral state such that it is a conceptual necessity that it entails some specific moral property. That is what the lack of entailment thesis tells us. The thought behind it is that a conceptual entailment thesis or necessity thesis does not hold between moral and non-moral properties. It means that there is no moral property (like wrongness) and no non-moral description (like the total non-moral description of a murder) such that, if an act has the non-moral description, it is a conceptual truth that it also has the moral property. Or in other words there is no moral property and non-moral description such that an act with the non-moral description conceptually necessitate the moral property. Why is the lack of entailment thesis plausible? Let us take a look at the moral judgment *murder is wrong*. Is there a non-moral description that conceptually implies that murder is wrong? One candidates could for example be *murder does not maximize happiness*. (It should be noted that the non-moral description's content is of no importance here since the question is if there theoretically can be any description as such). Blackburn and others share the intuition that there is no non-moral description that could conceptually imply any moral property. Based on that intuition the lack of entailment thesis is thought to be plausible.

We will now take a look at the combination of the two theses in Blackburn's argument. A theory that combines the moral supervenience thesis and the lack of entailment thesis says that “…, even if some G setup in this world is the very state upon which some F state supervenes, nevertheless, it might not have been that F state that supervened upon it.”(Blackburn, 1993, p. 132) “G setup” can in this context be replaced with the non-moral setup and the “F state” with the moral state. So the thought here is that the fact that some non-moral description is the supervenience base for some moral state is the way it works in our world. But it is conceptually possible that there could have been another moral property supervening on the very same non-moral property. I will try to illustrate what the combination of theses means with an example. Let us say that one person murders another person. There is a complete non-moral description of this event that includes all properties and facts that are not moral. If anything in the non-moral description was to be changed it would not be referring to this murder. According to the lack of entailment thesis it is not a conceptual necessity that this event, because of its non-moral status, entails a specific moral property like being wrong or evil (nor right or good for that matter). If one person claims that the murder is morally wrong and another person claims it to be morally right, it does not follow that one of them is making a conceptual mistake. And it does not follow that one of them must be confused about the conceptual meaning of the total non-moral description. Let us assume that in this world the act of murder is morally wrong, meaning that the moral property wrongness supervenes on the non-moral description of the murder. Then to be in line with the moral supervenience thesis
the act cannot be right unless the non-moral description differs. Or put in other words, if two acts of murder have the same non-moral properties they can not differ in their moral status according to the moral supervenience thesis. To sum up, the combination of the moral supervenience thesis and the lack of entailment thesis says that: if two acts share the same non-moral description one of them cannot be right and the other one wrong, but the non-moral description that constitutes the act does not entail any specific moral status like right or wrong.

2.2 The need for an explanation

Now we get to the question of what exactly is in need of an explanation. I think Shafer-Landau expresses it well: “... (i) why it is a conceptual truth that the moral supervenes on the natural, even though (ii) there are no conceptual truths that link the instantiation of natural properties to the moral ones” (Shafer-Landau, 2005, p. 325). Either we need to provide two distinct explanations to (i) and (ii) or one explanation that covers why, in case one of them is true, the other is true as well. The second type of explanation requirement is what Blackburn seems to have in mind. So the specific combination of the moral supervenience thesis and the lack of entailment thesis is in a sense a mystery and needs to be explained. Here is why, according to Blackburn:

The one thing we do not have is any mixed world, where some things are \(G^*\) and \(F\), and some are \(G^*\) but not \(F\). [...] These are ruled out by the supervenience claim (S): they are precisely the kind of possible world that would falsify the claim. My form of problem, or mystery, now begins to appear. Why should the possible worlds partition into only two kinds and not into three kinds? (Blackburn, 1993, pp. 134–135)

This explaining requirement that Blackburn has in mind is called: the need to explain the ban on mixed worlds. To understand the idea behind the ban on mixed worlds (the third kind of worlds that Blackburn mentions in the quote above) we can start by imagining a world where good supervenes on \(G^*\) (a set of non-moral properties). The moral supervenience claim implies that once good supervene on \(G^*\) everything that is \(G^*\) is good in this world. But according to the lack of entailment thesis there are other possible worlds where \(G^*\) is not good. So we have possible worlds where \(G^*\) is good and possible worlds where \(G^*\) is not good. The moral supervenience claim implies that there can not be a world where something that is \(G^*\) is good and something that is \(G^*\) is not good. The existence of a third mixed world is banned. (Blackburn, 1993, p. 134) By embracing moral supervenience and the lack of entailment thesis we commit ourselves to the fact that there are (conceptually) possible worlds where a \(G^*\)-act is good and other possible worlds where a \(G^*\)-act is not good. But why cannot there, in the same world, be some \(G^*\)-acts that are good and other \(G^*\)-acts that are not good? Or as Shafer-Landau puts it:
I will try to further enlighten why the ban on mixed worlds requires an explanation with an example. Let us take a look at the moral judgment *murder is wrong*. We assume again that in this world the moral property wrongness supervenes on the non-moral properties of the murder act. So in this world the particular act of murder is wrong. Then to be in line with moral supervenience any act of murder with the same non-moral description always has the property wrongness. Although the lack of entailment thesis says that there is no non-moral description that conceptually implies that murder is wrong. That means that in this world murder (with that particular non-moral description) is always wrong. But it is possible that the moral property rightness (or another moral property) supervenes on the non-moral properties of the act of murder, in another possible world. Due to the moral supervenience thesis there is a ban on mixed worlds in which both rightness and wrongness supervene on the same non-moral description of murder. Blackburn thinks that this ban on mixed worlds is puzzling and needs to be explained. The next discussion handles why this mystery is thought to show that anti-realism has an advantage over realism.

### 2.3 A problem for realists

In this way Blackburn argues that there is something important that has to be explained with regard to moral supervenience and entailment. He claims that a projectivist like himself can offer an explanation while the realist cannot.

> Supervenience [and the ban on mixed worlds] then becomes a mysterious fact, and one which he will have no explanation of (or no right to rely upon). It would be as though some people are B* and thinking of dogs, and others are B* and thinking of their aunts, but there is a ban on them traveling to inhabit the same place: completely inexplicable (Blackburn, 1984, pp. 185–186)

“He” who will have no explanation in the quote is of course the realist. What is the difference between the anti-realist and the realist that could make the realist inferior in this regard? The anti-realists and the realists have different views on moral properties. Moral properties are according to anti-realists dependent on us in some way. They do not believe in a moral reality where the moral properties are distributed and can be realized by us. Blackburn offers an explanation to the ban on mixed worlds in line with his anti-realistic projectivism.

> When we announce the A-commitments we are projecting, we are neither reacting to a given
distribution of A-properties, nor speculation about one. So the supervenience can be explained in terms of the constraints upon proper projection. Our purpose in projecting value predicates may demand that we respect supervenience. (Blackburn, 1984, p. 186)

In this context we can understand A-commitments as moral commitments and A-properties as moral properties. So since the existence of the moral properties is dependent on our projection, and not part of a moral reality, it can be suggested that the projecting process works in the way moral supervenience describes. It simply lies in the nature of the projecting process. In the realist's view, the moral properties that supervene on the non-moral properties are in one sense independent of judgments or people's attitudes. The moral properties are distributed in an objective moral reality and people can be aware or unaware of them. If a person believes that an act is wrong, that belief can be true or false depending on if the moral property wrongness actually does supervene on the non-moral properties of that act or not. That is why the realist cannot explain the ban on mixed worlds in terms of that it is incorporated in a process involved in moralizing (as Blackburn does). Therefore the ban on mixed worlds seems hard for the realist to explain.

So in this section we have seen how Blackburn argues that the combination of the moral supervenience thesis and the lack of entailment thesis is intuitively puzzling. And since the theses are plausible we need to provide an explanation for this mystery. He therefore claims that the anti-realists have an advantage over the realists because they have such an explanation. In the next section follows a presentation of Shafer-Landau's defense against these conclusions.

3. Shafer-Landau's defense

What possible defense strategies can the realist use against Blackburn's supervenience argument? In the article Supervenience and moral realism (1994) Shafer-Landau presents three general approaches for realists to defend themselves against the supervenience argument. One strategy is to claim that the problem Blackburn's argument points out is not specific for ethics, it is a problem for all domains were supervenience is thought to hold (the mental, colors etc). A second possible way is to abandon the lack of entailment thesis and a third strategy is to claim that both lack of entailment thesis and the moral supervenience thesis hold but that this does not pose an explanatory challenge. In this section, Shafer-Landau's attempts at these three approaches will be presented.

3.1 Global anti-realism

Shafer-Landau argues that the explanatory failure that Blackburn claims to have found is not specific to ethics. If we agree that it is in fact a serious explanatory disadvantage for realism we
need to embrace anti-realism globally, in all domains where the supervenience claim is valid. This argument does not discredit the conclusion or premises of the supervenience argument, but instead tries to show what other conclusion we need to draw if the argument is successful. Shafer-Landau points out that color properties and mental properties also are thought to be supervening properties. So let us imagine a red chair where the property redness supervenes on the specific physical properties that make the chair red. The lack of entailment thesis also holds in the case of colors since there is no physical description such that it (conceptually) entails any color property. So in this world everything that has the specific physical properties in question is red, but there are possible worlds where an object that has the specific physical properties is yellow. A world where some things with the physical properties are red and other things with the physical properties are yellow is banned, but why? In accordance with this line of thought we might then, because of Blackburn's argument, be forced to either accept that there is no explanatory mystery or accept anti-realism in all concerned domains. If we are to be moral anti-realists on the basis that realism cannot explain the ban on mixed worlds we should be anti-realist about all other domain where supervenience holds. That is why Shafer-Landau gives us the choice to either be realists in all these areas or ”...abandon the claim that such combinations generate explanatory failures...” (Shafer-Landau, 2003, p. 88).

3.2 Abandon the lack of entailment thesis
The second strategy is to claim that the lack of entailment thesis does not hold and explain moral supervenience in terms of entailment. Shafer-Landau then claims that there is no mystery left to explain.

Blackburn’s puzzle is no puzzle at all, provided we are justified in thinking that there are metaphysical entailments that link the instantiation of natural properties with the instantiation of moral ones. Moral realists who are ethical naturalists have always believed this. And many nonnaturalists believe this as well. I do; so does G.E. Moore. Nonnaturalists will deny that moral properties are natural ones, and they will insist on the multiple realizability of moral properties. So there will not be any conceptual or metaphysical entailments going from moral properties to natural ones. But if I and others are right, there will be entailments (metaphysical, not conceptual) that go the other way, from the natural to the moral. (Shafer-Landau, 2005, p. 326)

This might seem like the most obvious move for realists since it appears quite unproblematic for them to say that a specific non-moral description metaphysically entails a moral status. Since there is a moral reality in their view it is easy to imagine that a specific non-moral property of an act, like the property of causing pain, can entail a moral status of being wrong for example. Using this
strategy it seems to be clear that moral supervenience does not need explanation. Since the idea that a non-moral state entails a moral status seems to go hand in hand with the supervenience claim that "... if some set of base properties \([B^*]\) once subserve some property \([S]\), then \([B^*]\) must (in that world) always do so." (Shafer-Landau, 2003, p. 85). You could say that moral supervenience follows from the idea that non-moral properties entail moral properties. So on Shafer-Landau's view one resolution to the problem that Blackburn sets for realism is to conclude that the lack of entailment thesis should be abandoned on the metaphysical level.

So the explanation Shafer-Landau offers is that specific non-moral properties give rise to certain moral properties, this is metaphysically necessary. Shafer-Landau notes that the entailment thesis is a metaphysical necessity in his own theory, whereas the necessity is conceptual in Blackburn's lack of entailment thesis. Shafer-Landau writes the following about that:

> If certain base properties **metaphysically** necessitate the presence of specified moral properties, then the **conceptual** possibility that they fail to do so reveals only the limitation on our appreciation of the relevant metaphysical relations. There is no deep explanatory puzzle resisting resolution here.

(Shafer-Landau, 2003, p. 86)

### 3.3 No need for an explanation

The last of Shafer-Landau's strategies that will be discussed is his claim that the combination of theses (the lack of entailment thesis and the moral supervenience thesis) is not an explanatory mystery. There is simply no need for an explanation. One main idea in his reasoning is that moral supervenience is a brute fact. It is a constraint on theorizing in metaphysics. He tries to show it by a comparison with mental supervenience. According to Shafer-Landau the relevant mental supervenience claim is “*if* physical state \(B^*\) once underlay mental state \(S\), then in that world it must always do so” (Shafer-Landau, 1994, p. 148). He argues that we cannot provide any explanation for this, it is a truth that can be realized by anyone familiar with the concepts involved. In that sense, he thinks that it does not need an explanation, because it is a conceptual truth. With that said, some things about mental supervenience might need to be explained. For example why well-being supervene on brain states and not some other phenomena. He claims that the same is true for moral supervenience. Moral supervenience itself does not need an explanation because it is a conceptual truth. Other things about moral supervenience like how we are to understand moral properties might need explanation but not moral supervenience per se. (Shafer-Landau, 1994, p. 148)

But the fact that anti-realism can offer an explanation, does not that make realism less attractive
when we compare the two rivaling meta-ethical theories? The explanation that Blackburn and other anti-realists (like expressivists) have, is not a touchstone when comparing meta-ethical theories according to Shafer-Landau. Therefore the fact that anti-realist have an explanation and the realist has not, does not do any damage to realism.

And so the ability of expressivism to explain moral supervenience, while no doubt a good thing, does not automatically give it a leg up on my kind of realism, since explaining the conceptually necessary nature of moral supervenience is (I claim) not a proper criterion by which to assess the comparative merits of metaethical theories. (Shafer-Landau, 2005, p. 328)

However if Shafer-Landau is not correct in concluding that it is not a proper criterion he also questions how heavy of a burden that would be for the realist. Would it be that big of a problem that anti-realism is more attractive in this respect? Shafer-Landau leaves this question open, but it seems like Shafer-Landau still gets his message across. I think his intention is to show that the conclusions from the supervenience argument are at best not damaging at all or at least not as damaging as the anti-realists make it seem. To sum up, in this third strategy Shafer-Landau starts by saying that there is no explanation needed. Anti-realist's explanations are not an advantage since this type of explanation is not one of the things evaluated when comparing meta-ethical theories. He also guards himself by adding that even if the supervenience argument does show an explanatory disadvantage for realism it is not obvious how heavy it would weigh in the comparison between realism and anti-realism. (Shafer-Landau, 2005, p. 328)

4. Discussion

So far three different attempts to defend realism against the supervenience argument have been presented. In this discussion section the focus will be on how successful these attempts are. The anti-realist and expressivist Robert Mabrito has in the article Does Shafer-Landau have a problem with supervenience? presented useful critique. One of Mabrito's main points is that Shafer-Landau's supervenience claim is questionable. In this section we will see how that fact could be of great importance for how successful Shafer-Landau's defense is. Shafer-Landau's three defense strategies will be presented one by one. But before that it might be in place to dedicate a part of this discussion section to one of the most central (and so far unquestioned) ideas in this essay, namely moral supervenience itself.

4.1 Moral supervenience

Is it obvious that we need to respect the moral supervenience claim? Why must moral judgments be consistent in this sense? All participating parties in this essay seem to agree that the moral
supervenience thesis is plausible. That means agreeing to the fact that there is a constraint to the moral language, namely that it is consistent in the way that non-moral descriptions that are the same also receive the same moral evaluation. One objection might be that the moral supervenience thesis is not complex enough. To say that the moral supervenes on the non-moral might be a bit simply put. The supervenience base could also be moral (or partly moral). The supervenience relation can then be described as working in different layers (Fritzon, 2014, p. 19). For example the moral property wrongness might supervene on a set of evaluative properties and these evaluative properties supervene on non-moral properties. However this does not, in my opinion, challenge the plausibility of moral supervenience since the "lowest layer" ultimately is non-moral. If a person makes different moral judgments about two different events we can assume that there is a difference in the non-moral state that constitute the lowest supervenience base.

The moral supervenience claim is simply so basic that I think it cannot be abandoned. It is an intuitive part of our moral concepts. If a person is making moral judgments in such a way that moral supervenience is violated it seems that we cannot call that moralizing. It seems more like the person is passing random judgments that are similar to moral ones or take some kind of moral disguise. But it simply does not qualify as real moral judgments if they are not consistent in the way supervenience requires. One reason is that if we try to imagine an inconsistent moral language where judgments differ without any non-moral difference, it is hard to see that the moral concepts could be useful or comprehensive at all. For example it is reasonable to say that morality has a guiding function in decision making. We ought to act in the way that is right or good. But if moral properties that we talk about are not dependent on non-moral properties in a consistent way, how are we to separate right acts from wrong acts? Just trying to imagine moral concepts being inconsistent is hard and I think that indicates that moral supervenience is built-in to our moral concepts. I therefore believe we have enough reason to conclude that it is a conceptual truth that the moral supervenes on the non-moral.

4.2 Global anti-realism
In Shafer-Landau's argumentation regarding global anti-realism he points out that moral supervenience either is or is not a conceptual truth. If it is not then Blackburn's argument fails because that is one of the premises. But if it is then we are faced with an ultimatum; either we accept that there is no explanatory failure or we need to embrace anti-realism in other domains where the supervenience claim holds. (Shafer-Landau, 1994, p. 150) I believe it follows logically that we need to treat the different domains equally if there is no relevant difference between the
domains. If it can be shown that there is a relevant difference that Shafer-Landau fails to appreciate, then his conclusion can be made invalid. The expressivist Mabrito makes an attempt to show why Shafer-Landau's conclusion does not hold. He thinks it is because Shafer-Landau does not ground his argument on the relevant moral supervenience claim. Compare the following two understandings of the supervenience claim.

Shafer-Landau: If a concatenation of $Y$ properties once underlies (because it constitutes) an $X$ one, then (in that world) anything which possesses that concatenation of $Y$ properties must also possess the $X$ one. (Mabrito, 2005, p. 299)

Mabrito: If $x$ has some moral property $P$, then there is a concatenation of non-moral properties such that (i) $x$ possesses that concatenation and (ii) anything (in that world) which possesses that concatenation of non-moral properties must also possess the moral one $P$. (Mabrito, 2005, pp. 300–301)

In Shafer-Landau's general supervenience claim, $G$ properties and $F$ properties can be any kind of properties. Therefore there is an obvious analogy between the moral area and other areas with supervening properties. And it seems like the conclusions he makes about global anti-realism are legitimate based on that supervenience claim. But Mabrito argues that the problem is that Shafer-Landau's understanding of supervenience is too general. It thereby fails to capture the specific nature of the relation between moral properties and non-moral properties. But if Mabrito is going to change the fact that we stand before Shafer-Landau's ultimatum he needs to point out a relevant difference between the moral domain and the other relevant domains. He does that by taking mental properties as an example, but the reasoning is applicable to any equivalent domain. The relevant supervenience thesis about the mental is: (Compare it to Mabritos moral supervenience claim above.)

If $x$ has some mental property $P$, then there is a concatenation of physical properties such that (i) $x$ possesses that concatenation and (ii) anything (in that world) which possesses that concatenation of physical properties must also possess the mental one $P$. (Mabrito, 2005, p. 301)

This is, according to Mabrito, not a conceptual truth. A competent speaker could very well deny this claim, for example a person who is a substance dualist. If Mabrito is correct he points out a relevant difference between the mental and moral domains. Namely that the relevant moral supervenience claim is a conceptual truth but that the relevant mental supervenience claim is not a conceptual truth. In conclusion Mabrito argues that with the relevant definitions of the supervenience claims
Shafer-Landau's ultimatum can be avoided. It seems like Mabrito's case is convincing if we have a good enough reason to prefer his understanding of the supervenience claim over Shafer-Landau's. The argument Mabrito tries to persuade us with is that Shafer-Landau's supervenience claim is vacuous and fails to express the specific nature of the relation between moral and non-moral properties. If the supervenience claim, like Shafer-Landau says, holds for any type of properties the following is a conceptual truth as well:

If a concatenation of color properties once underlies (because it constitutes) a moral one, then (in that world) anything which possesses that concatenation of color properties must also possess the moral one. (Mabrito, 2005, p. 300)

In my opinion, this maneuver by Mabrito does not show that Shafer-Landau's supervenience claim is not a conceptual truth. That a moral property supervenes on color properties might sound strange because it seems very unlikely that color properties would constitutes a moral property in the way described in the claim above. But that does not change the fact that it is a conceptual truth in virtue of the constitution concept. However this maneuver by Mabrito does manage to show that Shafer-Landau's supervenience claim is trivial in a sense. Although the claim might be true in virtue of the constitution concept it is vaguer and more general than Mabrito's claim.

So the two philosopher present two different supervenience claims. One is vaguer than the other, but both are candidates for being conceptual truths. To determine what supervenience claim is “relevant” in this discussion, I think it is fair to use the principle that a stronger claim over-rules a weaker claim in case both of them are valid. By that I mean that it is correct to agree with Mabrito that his claim is relevant since it is a stronger and more specific supervenience claim. Therefore any conclusions that legitimately are drawn from Mabrito's claim will hold. The conclusion that Mabrito draws is that the mental supervenience claim is not a conceptual truth and therefore the conclusions from Blackburn's supervenience argument will not follow in that domain. Theoretically, one option for Shafer-Landau would be to say that Mabrito is mistaken and that the mental supervenience claim is in fact a conceptual truth. But Shafer-Landau makes no such attempt in his response to Mabrito in Replies to critiques (2005). He seems to accept that his global anti-realism argument based on his supervenience claim is not very convincing after considering Mabrito's critique. In the light of Mabrito's critique and Shafer-Landau's reaction to it, it seems like this particular strategy is not very successful and the ultimatum that Shafer-Landau sets up is not that threatening1.

1 There is a debate on whether a different view on base properties can make Mabrito's claims in this discussion invalid. In this view, the base properties are seen as either synchronic or diachronic (where the casual history of the base properties is taken into account). A main figure in that debate is Jeff Wisom. To do that debate justice would however require more space than I can provide in this essay. Therefore I will unfortunately have to bypass that debate.
follows a discussion about Shafer-Landau's second defense approach, to abandon the lack of entailment thesis.

4.3 Abandon the lack of entailment thesis

On Shafer-Landau's view there is one entailment thesis that is plausible. He thinks that it is a metaphysical necessity that certain non-moral properties entail particular moral properties. Shafer-Landau then tries to explain that the combination of his metaphysical entailment thesis and moral supervenience thesis poses no mystery.

Assume for now that it is a conceptual truth that moral facts/properties/relations are supervenient ones. The problem, then, should be that competent speakers of a language can conceive of a world in which the base properties that actually underlie particular moral ones fail to do so. But there is no mystery here, since people can conceive of many things that are not metaphysically possible.

(Shafer-Landau, 2003, p. 86)

Let us now take a closer look at what Shafer-Landau does in this defense strategy. Firstly we are asked to assume that moral supervenience is a conceptual truth. Secondly he explains why it is not a mystery that the conceptual lack of entailment thesis is true in the light of moral supervenience. He has an explanation but it does not seem like this is what the supervenience argument claims need explaining. As discussed in 2.2 The need of an explanation, what should be explained is the ban on mixed worlds. So what needs to be explained is rather: why moral supervenience is a conceptual truth in the light of the conceptual lack of entailment thesis. What Shafer-Landau does in the quote above is to hold moral supervenience as a constant and then explain how the lack of entailment thesis can be a conceptual truth although the metaphysical entailment thesis holds. However both premises in Blackburn's argument are conceptual necessities and regard our moral language. Shafer Landau's strategy to claim that an entailment thesis on a metaphysical level holds does not seem to address the concern that there is something important in respect to our moral language that needs to be explained. The moral supervenience thesis implies a conceptual ban on mixed worlds, and it seems like Shafer-Landau still has not provided an explanation of that ban.

So in this strategy, when Shafer-Landau abandons the lack of entailment thesis he does that on the metaphysical modality and does not reject the conceptual variant of the lack of entailment thesis. He does not, however, explain why moral supervenience is conceptually true in the light of the conceptual lack of entailment thesis and thereby explain the ban on mixed worlds. And that is the challenge that Blackburn seems to have had in mind. So although this line of though from Shafer-Landau might be useful (in other matters) or interesting, it does not seem to completely address the
challenge to explain a mystery that the supervenience argument shows about our moral language. In the previous part of the discussion section I argued that the global anti-realism strategy seems unsuccessful in the light of Mabrito's critique and now I conclude that the strategy to abandon the lack of entailment thesis does not in itself completely solve the challenge set up by the supervenience argument. How Shafer-Landau's third strategy, that there is no need for an explanation, stands against Blackburn's argument will be discussed next.

4.4 No need for an explanation

An important debate in this essay concerns whether the supervenience argument shows an explanatory disadvantage for moral realism or not. Blackburn here expresses his opinion that a supervenience claim in itself is not much worth without the explanation behind it.

> Supervenience claims are very popular in philosophy, because they promise some of the advantages of reduction without the cost of defending B*/A necessity claims. But the promise is slightly hollow: supervenience is usually quite uninteresting by itself. What is interesting is the reason why it holds.
> (Blackburn, 1984, p. 186)

On the other hand we have Shafer-Landau who argues that there is no need for an explanation. I will distinguish between three different arguments that support this standpoint. The first of Shafer-Landau's arguments is that because moral supervenience is a conceptual truth no explanation is required. A conceptual truth is thought to be realizable by anyone who understands the relevant concepts, and why would it then need to be explained? An example might make this line of thought more accessible. Consider the sentence: a circle is round. This is surely a conceptual truth that anyone who is a competent speaker can realize and one can therefore argue that it does not require an explanation. Even if I think that this is a compelling point, I am not so sure that this question is crucial in the discussion of the supervenience argument. In my reading of the supervenience argument what needs to be explained is not a conceptual truth (the moral supervenience claim) in itself, but rather why it is true in combination with another conceptual truth (the lack of entailment). It is only when we look at the two premises of the supervenience argument together that the sense of mystery appears. One by one the premises do not seem to pose a problem. So if I am correct, we do not need to explain the claim “a circle is round” in itself. But we might need to explain why it is a conceptual truth, if it would be mysterious in the light of another conceptual truth. So even if it is plausible that a conceptual truth in itself does not require an explanation, that is not enough to solve the challenge to explain the ban on mixed worlds. To avoid the requirement to explain the ban on mixed worlds one would need to claim that the ban on mixed worlds is a conceptual truth. Shafer-Landau does not, as far as I can see, make such a claim. And since the ban on mixed worlds is
intuitively puzzling and mysterious it seems troublesome to argue that it is a conceptual truth. So the mystery that remains unsolved is why there is a conceptual ban on mixed worlds. Although Shafer-Landau does not have an explanation it still needs to be explored if that fact makes anti-realism more attractive than realism in this regard.

That leads us to Shafer-Landau second argument that the anti-realist explanation poses no problem for realism because that type of explanation is not a proper criterion when comparing the meta-ethical theories. If Shafer-Landau is correct it follows logically that the supervenience argument cannot be used as an argument of why we should prefer anti-realism over realism. He could then successfully show that the conclusion of the supervenience argument has no force. We will now take a look at Shafer-Landau's arguments for denying that the explanation of the ban on mixed worlds is a proper criterion for assessing meta-ethical theories. Moral supervenience is according to Shafer-Landau one, among other, basic principle that we respect when we are theorizing in metaphysics. (Leibniz's law is another such principle). He thinks that we are correct in constraining our thinking in metaphysics in the way supervenience implies. Even if there can be a supporting explanation behind these types of basic principles the “...support it does receive will take the form of its being situated in reflective equilibrium, rather than having been derived from yet more fundamental and more clearly justified metaphysical principles.” (Shafer-Landau, 2005, p. 328) This assumption about the principles used in metaphysical theorizing and how fundamental and clearly justified they are, is not grounded in any further argumentation. Shafer-Landau does not seem to provide any reason for accepting this assumption. Because of that, this reasoning does not seem to be completely convincing. I also think one can object that even if Shafer-Landau is correct that the explanation of the ban on mixed worlds would not be derived from more fundamental metaphysical principles it is at least to some extent better to provide an explanation than to be unable to provide one.² So Shafer-Landau's second argument for why there is no need for an explanation seems to rely on an assumption about the principles in metaphysical theorizing, but he does not provide any argument for the plausibility of that assumption. Due to that fact and because of the possible objection, it seems as Shafer-Landau's argument is not enough to settle if the anti-realist explanation is an improper comparative criterion.

So far I have concluded that the argument that conceptual truths do not need to be explained is not enough to escape the supervenience argument since the challenge is rather to explain a mystery that

² For example one can argue that a theory with more unique coherent content is better than a theory with less unique coherent content. A theory with more unique content would have greater explanatory potential and in that sense be better.
appears when combining two conceptual truths. Shafer-Landau's other discussed argument, that the anti-realist explanation is an improper comparative criterion, is based on an assumption that he does not provide any arguments for holding. Therefore that argument alone does not seem to settle the question. The last argument that Shafer-Landau grounds his standpoint on is that in case the anti-realist explanation is a proper criterion it will not carry much weight in the comparison between anti-realism and realism. Here is an example provided by Shafer-Landau that aims to show that this type of explanation would in fact not weigh heavy in a comparison between the theories.

Consider: some theists have an explanation of why moral truths are what they are – God commanded them. And some moral realists, such as myself, have no explanation – the basic moral principles are brute metaphysical facts about the way the universe is structured. By Mabrito's reasoning, this means that, other things equal, we have reason to think that theism is true and that the nontheistic moral realism I develop is false. But until we are in a position to discern whether all other things are equal, the explanatory advantage had by the divine command theory does not, I think, carry much weight. (Shafer-Landau, 2005, pp. 328–329)

So let us imagine that anti-realism and realism are equally attractive in every other aspect and a comparison would be based solely on the fact that anti-realism can provide an explanation of the ban on mixed worlds and realism cannot. Then the anti-realist explanation might be a reason for favoring anti-realism over realism. But as a realist, Shafer-Landau clearly does not believe that all other things are equal and therefore it is not obvious that the explanation carries much weight in the comparison. If we agree with Shafer-Landau's reasoning it seems like a long way to go from the conclusions of the supervenience argument to a critical disadvantage for the realists. We would need to establish that the explanation of the ban on mixed worlds is a proper comparative criterion. If that can be done and all other things are equal, it would be an advantage for the anti-realist. Until we are in that position it seems uncertain how heavy the anti-realist explanation weigh in a comparison between the theories.

In the light of Blackburn's argument, Shafer-Landau's defense and Mabrito's critique I believe that the conclusion that can be drawn is that, out of the three strategies discussed in this essay, the third strategy is the one with most potential. That is to claim that there is no need for an explanation because the explanation is not a proper criterion to assess when comparing anti-realism with realism. Furthermore, even if it is a proper criterion it might not carry much weight in the comparison. The argument could be better grounded on a theory about proper criteria for comparing meta-ethical theories or a more developed theory about legitimate principles in metaphysical theorizing. If the result of using such a theory is that the ban on mixed worlds does not need an
explanation, the supervenience arguments conclusions can be made invalid. At the current state of
the discussion it seems uncertain if the conclusions of the supervenience argument should be seen
as a criterion to consider when comparing anti-realism with realism and, if so, how heavy it weighs
in the comparison.

5. Conclusions

The famous supervenience argument against the meta-ethical position moral realism is said to score
explanatory points for the anti-realists, because they have an explanation of the ban on mixed
worlds. The conclusions of this essay are, firstly, that a modification of the supervenience claim can
make it possible to avoid Shafer-Landau's ultimatum and the fact that we are forced to embrace
global anti-realism. Secondly, his strategy to abandon the lack of entailment thesis does not seem to
completely solve the challenge to explain the ban on mixed worlds. Thirdly, I conclude that the
most promising of the defense strategies discussed in this essay is to argue that there is no
explanation needed and the supervenience argument does in fact not show an explanatory advantage
for anti-realism. A theory about how to compare meta-ethical theories that includes which criteria
that are relevant and legitimate brute facts, would be helpful for the debate.
References


