The Metaphysics of Moral Explanations

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1   Moral Principles

We say some actions are right in first-order ethics. But why are these actions right? Many think that certain natural or purely descriptive facts together with a moral fact which relate these natural facts and the moral properties in question (i.e. rightness), *fully* explains why these actions are right.

For example, a natural fact [A maximises utility] together with a moral fact [For any action A, if A maximises utility, then A is right], fully explains [A is right].[1] We call these moral facts involved in explaining why certain actions have certain moral properties (e.g. rightness, permissibility) moral principles.

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[1]We'll denote the fact A as [A].

2 Data

Every fully satisfactory metaethical theory should explain, or otherwise accommodate in a principled manner, the following three claims:

(i) (**Strong Supervenience**) $\forall M(\forall x)[Mx \rightarrow \exists N(Nx\&\Box(\forall y(Ny \rightarrow My)))]$,

(ii) Particular moral facts are at least partly (and at least ultimately) explained by particular natural facts.

(iii) Data point (iii): fittMoral principles are explanatory in nature.

"We doubt (i) is most fundamental. As is standardly recognized, supervenience is "not a 'deep' metaphysical relation" but "a 'surface' relation that reports a pattern of property covariation, suggesting the presence of an interesting dependency relation that might explain it" (Kim 1993: 167). Supervenience theses thus fittcall for explanation rather than provide them. So ideally, (i) can be accounted for in terms of (ii) or (iii) or both."

"We think the best way of making sense of (i) is by opting for the package of (ii) together with the interpretation of (iii) on which moral principles are explanatory in role."

Divide & Conquer (D&C) Strategy: A natural account is a tripartite account of moral explanations: particular moral facts are explained by particular natural facts together with general moral principles, which incorporates (ii) and (iii). This 'makes sense' of (i), given the substantive but plausible assumption that the

fundamental moral principles obtain of metaphysical necessity (if at all).

It's not clear (and not important here) how moral principles make their way into the explanation. They can either be part of the ground of the grounded, e.g. [A is right], or 'ground' (meta-ground)/ 'back'/... the grounding fact [A maximises utility] $<$ [A is right].

How does this account makes sense of (i): "Essentially, Strong Supervenience states that the moral properties of some particular things cannot differ unless their natural properties differ. On the tripartite account, the moral properties of particular things depend on two things: (a) which natural properties they have and (b) which moral principles obtain. Regarding (a), it's trivial that two things cannot differ in their natural properties without differing in their natural properties. Regarding (b), it's also trivial that two things cannot differ with respect to which moral principles obtain, because such principles canfit differ period— they obtain of necessity and so trivially supervene on everything. Hence, a particular thing's moral properties depend on two things—(a) and (b)—both of which supervene on the thing's natural properties for trivial reasons. It's therefore no surprise that moral properties of particular things canfit differ unless their natural properties differ."

Given all this, it seems that we may interpret 'make sense' as 'grounding' as well since Supervenience is not deep and 'made sense' by moral principles. It seems also plausible to treat this explanation as simply that moral principles ground relevant Strong Supervenience.

3   Moral principles are not merely explanatory in content

Moral principles are commonly formulated as universal generalizations. For example,

(U_B) Necessarily, an action is required if and only if, and fully because, it maximizes happiness.

We take U_B as the same as its generalization.

Given the common assumption that universal generalizations obtain at least partly in virtue of their instances, $[U_B]$ obtains (if at all) in virtue of this action being required because it maximizes happiness, that action being required because it maximizes happiness, and so on for each possible required action (perhaps together with a totality fact).

But $[U_B]$ cannot make sense of Strong Supervenience because we cannot infer generalised facts from particular facts: "To see why, let D be the set of Matti's natural properties. Assuming he's good, Strong Supervenience allows us to infer that every other possible entity with the properties in D is also good. But if we take (ii) to be more fundamental than (iii), it's not clear why that inference is sound. On Berkerfis view, there are some natural properties in D such that the fact that Matti has those properties fully explains the fact that he's good. Call those natural properties D*. Given grounding necessitism— i.e., the thesis that if

some facts Γ fully explain the fact [Q], then it is necessary that if Γ obtain then [Q] obtains— it follows that, necessarily, if Matti is D* then he is good. But it doesn't follow that if, say, Folke has the properties in D (and thus the ones in D*) then Folke is good. That's because Berker takes the grounding relation to hold between wholly particular natural facts (e.g., that Matti is D*) and wholly particular moral facts (e.g., that Matti is good). As a result, nothing entitles us to generalize from facts about the natural and moral properties of one particular entity to those of another. In other words, even if the properties in D are repeatable, the subjects instantiating them—i.e, Matti and Folke— remain particular and non-repeatable. And generalizations from facts about one particular to another is precisely what the supervenience thesis captures: if someone with the properties in F is good, then anyonr with those properties is good.

Of course, if a principle like (U_B*) is true for goodness, it follows that goodness supervenes on the natural properties specified by that principle. But the point is that given Berker's underlying metaphysics, there's no reason to expect there to be true principles of that form, and hence no reason to expect supervenience to be true. Whether going from the wholly particular to the general secures such principles depends on what the various patterns among wholly particular facts across possible worlds happen to look like. Hence, the Hyper-intensional Humeanfis principles (and thus supervenience) ends up hostage to a kind of modal miracle.

In other words, although principles like (U_B*), if true, would secure superve-

nience, they would do so in the wrong way— rather than being made sense of in a principled fashion, it would still look like a mystery that the Humean mosaic necessarily turns out to give rise to them."

4   Solutions

4.1   Nomic View

Restate as (U_N) x maximizes happiness $<<_x$ x is morally required. (U_N) states the general explanatory connection that holds between facts of the form [x maximizes happiness] and facts of the form [x is morally required].

4.2   Moral Platonism

According to platonism, moral terms like 'good', 'wrong', and 'obligatory' stand for two distinct but intimately connected properties. One property—call it 'goodness(kind)' — applies to kinds or types of things. The other—call it 'goodness(part)'fitt— applies to particulars. Particular-applying moral properties are then metaphysically analyzed in terms of more fundamental kind-applying ones.

So principles are just like (PF_P) Lying is (pro tanto) wrong(kind). Assuming that to be a wrong(part) action is just to be an action of a wrong(kind), (PF_P) guarantees that every instance of lying is wrong(part).

5   A Worry

An instance of Strong Supervenience is

(Complex-Supervience) $\forall x[Rx \rightarrow \exists N(Nx\&\Box(\forall y(Ny \rightarrow (\lambda x.Rx\&(Px\vee\neg Px))y)))]$.

It seems somewhat plausible and intuitive to think that every instance of Strong Supervenience is to be explained by some moral principles. But what principles we have to explain Complex-Supervenicen.

Clearly, there's no moral principle relates [x maximises utility] and [x is (good and either P or not-P)] (e.g. [x max. $<<_x$ x is right]) because the natural facts in the moral principles need to fully explain why certain actions have certain moral properties. But it seems that if moral principles are hyperintensional, then such explanation cannot be full.

Can a principle that links [x maximises utility] and [x is good] explain Complex-Supervenience. It seems suspicious: ϕ and ψ being logically equivalent doesn't mean they have the same ground (consider the grounds of $p \wedge p$ and p). Surely there are usually certain grounding relations hold between logically equivalent formulae when they're of the same subject matter. But it seems then that if [x max. $<<_x$ x is right]$<$[$\Box$(Ma$\rightarrow$ Ra)], then [x max. $<<_x$ x is right]$<$[$\Box\neg$Ma $\vee\Box$ Ra)] (or the reverse). Then if [x max. $<<_x$ x is right]$<$[$\Box$(Ma$\rightarrow (\lambda x.Rx\&(Px \vee \neg Px))a)$], then [x max. $<<_x$ x is right]$<$ [$\Box\neg$Ma $\vee\Box$Ra $\wedge(\Box Pa \vee \Box\neg Pa)$]. But it seems that no fact can fully explain both [$\Box\neg$Ma $\vee\Box$ Ra)] and [$\Box\neg$Ma $\vee\Box$Ra $\wedge(\Box Pa \vee \Box\neg Pa)$].