

SWINBURNE ON THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA. CAN SUPERVENIENCE SAVE HIM?

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Abstract. Modern philosophers normally either reject the „divine command theory” of ethics and argue that moral duties are independent of any commands, or make it dependent on God’s commands but like Robert Adams modify their theory and identify moral duties in terms of the commands of a *loving* God. Adams regards this theory as metaphysically necessary. That is, if it is true, it is true in all possible worlds. But Swinburne’s (1981) position is unprecedented insofar as he regards moral truths as analytically necessary. In this paper Swinburne’s argument will be discussed and I will reveal some of the difficulties involved in categorising general moral principles (if there are such principles) as logical (analytical/necessary) truths.

I. Contingent Versus Necessary Ethical Truths

Swinburne begins by making his conception of God explicit. For him, God is an omniscient, unconstrained and omnipotent being. By ‘omniscient’ he means knowing everything which it is logically possible to know,’ and by ‘omnipotent’ he means ‘being able to do anything logically possible.’ And by God being ‘unconstrained’ he means that ‘his choices are not determined or influenced even in part by causes (as opposed to reasons) over which he has no control’. Having done this, Swinburne puts forward his view of the nature of ethical judgements. He regards himself as a moral objectivist:

My assumption of meta-ethics is that expressions apparently attributing to things, goodness, obligatoriness etc. are statements which are true or false independently of human beliefs or attitudes towards those things; to call an action good is to attribute a property to it, not merely to express approval of it,

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commend it, or something similar ... I assume, in other words, that these are propositions of first order-ethics which have a truth value, just as bodies are heavy or electrically charged whether or not men know this about them (1981, p. 123).

Swinburne next draws a line between contingent and necessary moral truths. Moral objectivism, he claims, entails „that there are two kinds of moral truth – (logically) necessary moral truths and contingent moral truths ... when an object *a* has a certain moral property, say *M*, its possession of it is entailed by it possessing certain natural properties, say *A*, *B*, and *C*. Then it is a necessary truth that anything which is *A*, *B*, and *C* is *M*; but a contingent truth that *a* is *M* or that there is an object which is *A* and *M*” (1989, p. 186).

Swinburne’s justification for this distinction is a quasi-conceptual argument. Consider the statement ‘I ought now to pay £10 to the bookshop’ is true. This specific statement, Swinburne argues, cannot be true unless a more general moral truth holds – which is humans ought to pay their debts – of which the specific truth is a consequence. The truth of this general statement and the fact that I bought £10 worth of books from the bookshop, and they have just sent me a bill for the books, entails the truth of the particular statement. Thus, the general moral statement has to be necessarily true to underpin the truth of the specific one. That is, it has to hold regardless of how the world is in contingent respects. On the contrary, contingent moral truths hold because contingent circumstances are as they are. That I bought £10 of books and they sent me a bill are contingent states of affairs; if they don’t hold, I will have no obligation to pay the bookshop £10 (1981, p. 124).

Swinburne thinks if there is a contingent moral truth, there must also be a necessary moral truth, from which it follows that if there is a contingently obligatory action, there must also be a necessarily obligatory action (1981, p. 124). A key question then relates to the nature of the necessity involved here; whether it is a factual or logical necessity. Swinburne argues that universal moral truths are analytically true, and therefore should be included among logical necessities. God’s command regarding telling the truth is something that God must command, since the statement that ‘telling the truth is good’ is analytic.¹ Were it not analytic, God’s omnipotence would be compromised by being constrained by a law (or rule) that could have been otherwise.

¹ Swinburne defines analytic statements as follows: „I understand „analytic” in a wide sense. I understand by a logically necessary or analytic statement a statement, the denial of which states nothing which it is coherent to suppose could be true. I understand by a synthetic statement a statement which is not analytic” (Swinburne 1981, p. 125). In other words, as

To establish the analyticity of ethical truths, Swinburne attempts to apply *a reductio ad absurdam* to the opposite position, the view that necessary moral truths are synthetic and that their ‘necessity’ is only a factual necessity. He says ‘suppose that necessary moral truths were synthetic,’ it would follow that if there is a set of circumstances *C* in which *A* is obligatory there is an exactly similar set of circumstances in which *A* is not obligatory. Consequently, if necessary moral truths were synthetic, it would be coherent to suppose that there is a universe which differs from ours in the respect that under circumstances C_1 , *A* was not obligatory, but in no contingent respect at all.² But how could a world differ from ours solely in an ethical respect (1981, p. 126)? To set the stage for the analysis to follow, it is worth spelling out various premises that underlie this argument:

- I) Necessary moral truths hold whatever the world is like in contingent respects.
- II) If necessary moral truths were synthetic, it would be coherent to suppose that there is a universe which differs from ours in the respect that under circumstances C_1 , *A* was not obligatory, but in no contingent respect at all.
- III) If one thing is good and another bad, they have to differ in some further (non-moral) respects (the principle of supervenience).
- IV) Therefore, necessary moral truths are not synthetic; they are analytic.

Swinburne’s solution to the *Euthyphro* dilemma, therefore, runs as follows: In the case of necessary moral truths, the theist can, and should, take the second horn of the dilemma, considering them as independent of God’s will. But this entails no limitation on divine will, since necessarily obligatory actions are obligatory by logical necessity rather than by factual necessity. God’s acceptance of logically necessary truths, moral or otherwise, is no infringement of his power. For God to be omnipotent, he only has to be able to do whatever is logically possible:

If for any specified action which is obligatory (e.g. telling the truth) it is analytic that it is obligatory, then it is no restriction on God that if he is to urge men to do what is obligatory he must urge them to do those actions which of logical necessity are obligatory (1981, p. 125).

he defines analytic statement in his other paper, „a proposition is analytic if and only if its negation is not coherent” (Swinburne 1975, p. 229).

² C_1 is a subset of *C*.

As regards contingent moral truths, Swinburne favours the first horn of the dilemma, holding that it is God who makes contingent moral obligations (judgements) true. That is, since God is the creator and sustainer of the universe, any contingent circumstances *C* are brought about either directly or indirectly by God. Therefore, if under circumstances *C*, an action *A* is obligatory it is God who brings about *C*, which consequently makes *A* obligatory.

Thus Swinburne takes both horns of the *Euthyphro* dilemma as acceptable, though in different ways. The first horn is considered to be true of actions that are contingently obligatory while the second is considered to be true of actions that are necessarily obligatory. Both horns can be accepted by a theist, without any contradiction.

II. Subject Contingency does not Imply Judgement Contingency

Swinburne's solution to the *Euthyphro* dilemma rests, on the one hand, on his distinction between contingent and necessary moral truths and, on the other, on his argument that necessary moral truths are analytic and must therefore be reckoned among logical necessities. These underlying assumptions are both problematic, failing to stand up to a close critical analysis. And consequently, his whole resolution of the long-standing dilemma falters. An analysis of the dichotomy of necessary and contingent moral truths comes first.

Recall that Swinburne claims: „if there is a contingent moral truth, then there is a necessary moral truth; from which it follows that if there is a contingently obligatory action, there is a necessarily obligatory action” (1981, p. 124). But what is the reason for the claim that if there is a contingent moral truth there must be a necessary moral truth as well? This is a statement requiring some justification, as such a procedure is not always allowed.

Suppose that due to possessing certain physical properties, say *A*, *B* and *C*, *a* has a certain chemical property *M*. Does this fact imply that by necessity everything which possesses *A*, *B* and *C* also has *M*? Obviously not, due to the well-known problem of induction. The fact that an object, due to its possessing a set of natural properties is, for instance, iron or green, does not logically entail that everything that has these natural properties is also iron or green, let alone necessarily. Swinburne's mode of argument is valid only when one thinks of a singular, non-universal, moral judgement in exactly the same way as one would think of a specific mathematical or geometrical statement. Consider a plane triangle. By conceptual analysis it can be shown that its internal angles add up to 180 degrees. This is a necessary truth, from

which one can justifiably move to the universal necessary truth that every plane triangle's internal angles add up to 180 degrees. But the move is justified only because the initial singular proposition is necessary. Furthermore, no dissimilarity between triangles is imagined as far as the predicate 'adds up to 180 degrees' is concerned. This is an issue belonging to the philosophy of mathematics, irrelevant to the present concern. What is relevant here is that if the initial statement is not necessarily true it would not follow that the latter, universal claim is necessarily true. However, according to Swinburne, singular moral judgements are contingently true. For this reason they cannot provide any ground to conclude that there must be universal moral truths, which are necessarily true. In sum, the existence of necessary moral truths cannot be derived from the existence of contingent moral truths. It requires some independent reason.

Moreover, on Swinburne's view, the singular moral truth 'I ought to pay £10 to the book shop' is contingent just because it so happened that I bought £10 books from the bookshop, though it might have happened otherwise. But, what is contingent here is the existence of the subject of the judgement, rather than the judgement itself. However, the fact that the subject of a judgement is contingent, i.e., it might occur or not, and the claim that the judgement itself is contingent, i.e., it might be true or not, are two entirely distinct things. The latter cannot be deduced from the former. When we are talking of contingent truths, contingency is attributed to the relation between the predicate and the subject, rather than the subject itself. For instance 'this triangle-shaped rubber has three angles'. The subject of this proposition is contingent; it is possible for it not to exist, although the proposition itself is necessary. Now if our analysis holds, it turns out that on Swinburne's view all true moral propositions are in fact necessarily true. Literally, there is no contingent moral truth, and the alleged dichotomy of moral truths is somehow misleading.

Swinburne himself seems to come close to the same idea when he writes that contingent moral truths hold because the world is as it is in contingent respects. But that those moral truths hold under the contingent circumstances is itself a necessary moral truth. For if we state fully the contingent circumstances which make a contingent moral truth to hold, it cannot be a contingent matter that it does hold under those circumstances (1981, p. 124).

Consequently, if all moral truths are logically necessary, there will remain no difference between God's relations to singular moral truths, those whose subjects and the circumstances of which are contingent, and universal moral truths, those which do not refer to any specific action, i.e. are lacking existential commitments; God can breach neither. Just as he can never prevent

a triangle-shaped rubber from having three angles. Although according to theists he may destroy the object any moment he wishes, if he leaves it to continue its existence, he must necessarily leave as having three angles.³

III. An Appraisal of Swinburne's Main Argument

Although Swinburne does not explicitly argue for the logical necessity of moral truths, he appeals to the principle of supervenience to reject the anti-naturalist view on moral issues.⁴ In his view, because of the supervenience principle, any anti-naturalist position is bound to be implausible. „The anti-naturalist allows the logical possibility of two objects being exactly alike in their natural properties but differing in their moral properties – e.g. two actions of killing a man in exactly the same circumstances differing only in that the one action is right and the other wrong. But this does seem incoherent” (1989, p. 185). The supervenience principle, as seen before, implies that there could be no moral difference without a natural one. This consideration appears to implicitly underlie Swinburne's claim for the logical necessity of general moral principles. It is therefore worth investigating whether the principle entails the logical necessity of general moral principles.

An analysis of this query requires distinguishing two possible interpretations of moral supervenience – weak and strong supervenience. To precisely spell out these notions, note the core idea of moral supervenience. It says that if an action satisfies C_1, \dots, C_n , where C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n is a complete natural description of the action, and has the moral property M , and C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n underlies M , then any other action satisfying C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n , will also have M , and the action cannot change in respect of M without changing in respect of C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n , even though the possession of C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n does not entail the possession of M .⁵

³ What Swinburne has in mind may best be captured by distinguishing between conditional and unconditional moral truths. Conditional moral propositions do not have any existential commitment; however, unconditional moral propositions do. In any case both kinds of moral truth are necessarily true. What Swinburne needs to show is why moral truths are necessary?

⁴ On the anti-naturalist view possession of natural properties never entails possession of moral properties. Moral properties are logically distinct from natural properties, and so it is logically possible that any moral property be possessed by an object with any combination of natural properties. [...] E.g., two actions of killing a man in exactly the same circumstances differing only in that the one action is right and the other wrong (Swinburne 1989, p. 185).

⁵ See Jonathan Dancy (1981, p. 373).

A key question is whether the validity of the supervenience claim is confined to a single possible world or is true across all possible worlds.⁶ The weak supervenience principle confines the idea to a single possible world. It states that in any particular possible world if an action has the natural properties C_1, \dots, C_n and the moral property M then every action in that world possessing C_1, \dots, C_n also possesses M . Weak supervenience rules out *mixed* worlds, where some actions possess non-moral features C_1, \dots, C_n and moral feature M while some other actions possess C_1, \dots, C_n but lack M . Weak supervenience, however, allows the possibility of worlds in which there are actions possessing C_1, \dots, C_n but lacking M . Strong supervenience, on the other hand, extends the supervenience idea to every possible world. It states that if in a possible world an action has moral property M because of the non-moral properties C_1, \dots, C_n then in every possible world if an action has properties C_1, \dots, C_n it *must* also possess the moral property M . Any world qualitatively identical with the actual world in terms of the base properties C_1, \dots, C_n must be identical in terms of the supervening property M .⁷

If we denote C_1, \dots, C_n , by C^* , underlying by \cup , and necessity by N , the two alternative interpretations can be formalised in the following way:

$$(W) \quad N(\exists X)(C^*X \ \& \ MX \ \& \ (C^*X \cup MX)) \supset (Y)(C^*Y \supset MY)$$

$$(S) \quad N(\exists X)(C^*X \ \& \ MX \ \& \ (C^*X \cup MX)) \supset N(Y)(C^*Y \supset MY)$$

Weak supervenience (W) implies a contingent relationship between the base properties C^* and the supervening property M , and does not rule out possible worlds where actions satisfy C^* but not M . On this account, moral truths are not necessary, let alone being logically necessary. By contrast, strong supervenience (S) generalises the supervenience claim to all possible worlds, making the relationship between the base properties C^* and the moral property M a necessary relation. If in one possible world an action satisfying C^* possesses M , then in every possible world any action satisfying C^* also possesses M .

⁶ Consider when we say 'killing is a bad action'. According to the supervenience claim 'killing' as an action has a set of natural properties such as 'causing pain,' 'causing fear', which underpin its moral property, namely being bad, and this is what justify us to assign badness to it.

⁷ See Jaegwon Kim (1993, p. 64).

To explore the implication of this distinction, it is also vital to draw attention to the distinct necessities involved in the two accounts. The necessity operator coming before the two formulations has to be formulated similarly. They both have to be taken as logical necessity. The supervenience claim, if true, is logically true. In addition, there is an inner necessity operator present in the strong account of supervenience. It is this necessity operator that distinguishes the two accounts. As a consequence, to establish the necessity of general moral truths on the basis of the supervenience thesis, it is not only necessary to argue for the strong account, but it is also necessary to show that the inner necessity operator also stands for logical necessity. A failure to establish any of these claims will undermine the claim that general moral truths are logically (analytically) true.⁸

With these preliminaries, it is now time to investigate the interpretation that Swinburne might have in mind. In his allusion to supervenience, Swinburne refers to R. M. Hare's seminal work (1952). The following passage captures the gist of Hare's view on supervenience:

First, let us take that characteristic of 'good' which has been called its supervenience. Suppose that we say 'St. Francis was a good man'. It is logically impossible to say this and to maintain at the same time that there might have been another man placed in the same circumstances as St. Francis, and who behaved in exactly the same way, but who differed from St. Francis in this respect only, that he was not a good man (1952, p. 145).

This passage rules out the existence of mixed worlds; worlds where St. Francis has non-moral properties C^* and is morally good, while a different person has exactly the same natural properties as St. Francis but is not morally good. Nevertheless, the passage is silent about the existence of possible worlds where everyone has natural properties C^* but no one is morally good. The passage can, therefore, be considered as a statement of weak supervenience. Later on Hare makes it clear that in his opinion supervenience „is one of the main constituents of our old friend universalisability” (Hare 1984, p. 3), pointing out that his position is nearer to weak supervenience. The weak interpretation, as stated, permits the existence of morally different words that share exactly similar natural properties.

It is possible that by supervenience Swinburne means strong supervenience, which implies the necessity of moral principles. The plausibility of the

⁸ Philosophers have defended both interpretations of supervenience. Simon Blackburn (1988, pp. 61-63) and R.M. Hare (1952, p. 145) defend the weak supervenience thesis, while Mark Murphy (2002, p. 26) argues for the strong interpretation.

strong account has been the subject of philosophical controversy. For the sake of brevity, these controversies are not raised here. Instead attention will be focused on the interpretation of the inner necessity operator. The necessity open to both logical (analytic) and metaphysical (causal) interpretation (Dreier 1992).⁹ By suggesting that general moral truths are logically necessary, Swinburne takes the inner necessity to represent a logical (analytic) necessity. Yet, this seems wrong, as the following argument reveals:¹⁰

- I. If the inner necessity is taken as a logical-analytical necessity, the proposition 'All X's which satisfy C_1, \dots, C_n , possess M ' (hereafter P) is logically necessarily true, i.e., true in every possible world.
- II. If P is logically necessarily (analytically) true, its negation $\neg P$ is logically necessarily false. That is, $\neg P$ is either itself self-contradictory or entails some self-contradictory propositions, which means there is no possible world in which $\neg P$ is true (Swinburne 1975, p. 228).
- III. If $\neg P$ is logically necessarily false, so will be the singular proposition 'A satisfies C_1, \dots, C_n , and is $\neg M$ ' (hereafter S). S expresses an instance of the general proposition $\neg P$.
- IV. S contradicts P, but this does not mean that S is self-contradictory. It just means that S and P cannot both be true. If S is true P is false, and if P is true S is false. However, a proposition is incoherent by itself not in respect of other propositions.¹¹ What matters here is whether S itself is incoherent (logically necessarily false).

⁹ Having considered weak supervenience let examine the strong version. As it is clear from its formalism if one interprets it strongly one will commit oneself to the idea that moral truths are necessary truths. The inner necessity is attributed directly to moral truths. However, two different understandings of the inner necessity is in the offing, it might be interpreted either 'logically' or 'metaphysically' (Dreier 1992).

¹⁰ In the following argument logical necessity is taken in the sense of analytic statement (Swinburne 1975, p. 228).

¹¹ Swinburne suggests several definitions of analyticity and argues that they are in fact equivalent: 'A proposition is analytic if and only if its negation entails an explicitly self-contradictory proposition' (i.e. a proposition which says that something is the case and that it is not the case, that is a statement of the form 'P and $\neg P$ ' such as 'it is blue and it is not blue'). By this test 'all bachelors are unmarried' is analytic. But proposition S (i.e., C_1, \dots, C_n possess $\neg M$) is not like the proposition 'it is blue and it is not blue'. Another definition, which Swinburne proposes, is this: 'a proposition is analytic if and only if its negation is not coherent'. I understand by a coherent proposition one which it makes sense to suppose is true. One such that we can conceive of, that is imagine or suppose, ... being true. (1975, p. 229). By this criterion proposition S (i.e., C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n possess $\neg M$) also turn out to be coherent. As one can conceive or imagine that S is true.

- V. In order for S to be incoherent it must be either itself self-contradictory or entail some self-contradictory proposition (Swinburne 1975, p. 229). However, to claim that S is self-contradictory is to claim that there is directly some conceptual, definability, relation between C^* and M which is violated by S. But this is not consistent with moral supervenience. Supervenience is meant to capture a relation that is not conceptual (Kim 1978, p. 151).¹² Swinburne himself rejects that there is a conceptual relation between moral and natural properties. More than that, since there is by assumption no conceptual or logical connection between moral and non-moral properties, S does not entail a self-contradictory proposition either. For any proposition to entail a self-contradictory proposition the connection between the proposition's subject and predicate should be conceptual (logical) (Swinburne, 1975). S is therefore a coherent statement.
- VI. If S is coherent then $\neg P$ is also coherent.
- VII. If $\neg P$ is coherent, P is not a logically necessary truth.
- VIII. But if P is not logically necessarily true, it is wrong to take the inner necessity in the strong moral supervenience formalism as representing logical necessity.

In a nutshell, the belief in supervenience does not imply the logical (analytical) necessity of general moral principles. In fact, it contradicts it:

Next the explanation of this logical impossibility does not lie in any form of naturalism; it is not the case that there is any conjunction C of descriptive characteristics such that to say that a man has C entails that he is morally good ... For, if this were the case, we should be unable to commend any man for having those characteristics; we should only be able to say that he had them. Nevertheless, the judgement that a man is morally good is not logically independent of judgement that he has certain other characteristics we may call virtues or good-

¹² Supervenience is intended to join these two kinds of properties without entailing property to property connection. As argued by Kim (1978), to take it as definitional or to assume an entailment relationship between them will undermine any attraction of the supervenience concept: „Furthermore, dependence in the strong logical sense is not intended to imply factual definability or entailment of moral properties. In fact the main point of talk of supervenience is to have a relationship of dependence of determination between two families of properties without property to property connections between the families. Supervenience is intended to be just this kind of relationship” (Kim 1978, p. 150). „The attraction of the concept of supervenience consists precisely in the prospect of its providing us with a determinative relationship between two families of properties where there are no correlations between the properties in the two families” (Kim 1978, p.151).

making characteristics; there is a relation between them, although it is not one of entailment or identity of meaning (R. M. Hare 1952, p. 145).¹³

J.L. Mackie (1982) argues in a different way to refute Swinburne's position. If the relation between moral and natural properties were analytical, he argues, moral judgements such as 'A is wrong' or 'B is right' couldn't be action guiding.

According to objectivists, wrongness is intrinsically prescriptive or action guiding. It in itself constitutes a reason for not doing the wrong action. But if moral on natural is analytic it entails that the natural features can be intrinsically action guiding. But the natural features on which moral ones supervene cannot be intrinsically action guiding. Supervenience then must be a synthetic connection (Mackie 1982, p. 115).

Since moral supervenience is inconsistent with the belief in the logical (analytical) necessity of general moral truths, the only way to interpret the inner necessity in the strong supervenience account is to interpret it as a factual (metaphysical / causal) necessity. Any such interpretation undermines Swinburne's resolution of the *Euthyphro* dilemma. In his view, divine power is only confined by logical necessities (broadly understood), not causal or factual necessities. Swinburne's solution of the dilemma is based on a failure to draw a distinction between weak and strong supervenience and, moreover, to distinguish between the outer and inner necessities present in the strong formalism.

IV. Conclusion

The point of departure in Swinburne's approach is a meta-ethical position about ethical judgements. Swinburne takes moral judgements to be statements of facts that can be true or false. He classifies moral statements into particular and general statements. And, using the supervenience principle, he argues that general moral statements, if true, are logically necessarily (or, broadly speaking, analytically) true. The *Euthyphro* dilemma is thus resolved by holding that contingent (particular) moral judgements are dependent on divine will. Yet, since divine power is confined to logical pos-

¹³ „The thing about supervenience is that they posit dependent without conceptual reducibility, whereas the thing about analytic/logical necessity is that its dependence is a matter of conceptual reducibility” (Mawson 2002, p. 5).

sibilities, general moral judgements are independent of divine will. They are logically (analytically) true.

Central to Swinburne's defence is the logical necessity or analyticity of general moral truths. This, Swinburne thinks, follows from the supervenience principle, which rules out moral differences without natural differences. To assess this claim, the paper distinguished between weak and strong accounts of supervenience and, more importantly, drew attention to the two types of necessity involved in the strong account. The weak account does not imply the necessity of general moral truths, let alone their logical necessity. To defend his position Swinburne needs not only to defend the strong account of supervenience but also to argue that the inner necessity must be taken as logical necessity. But the denial of general moral truths is neither self-contradictory nor implies self-contradiction. Therefore, according to Swinburne's own definition of logical (or analytical) truth, general moral truths cannot be regarded as logical (or analytical) truths. Granting the strong account of supervenience, general moral truths are only metaphysically (factually) necessary. On Swinburne's view, divine omnipotence encompasses factual necessities, and so, like the traditional accounts of the divine command theory, his account is equally open to the arbitrariness objection. In fact, on a closer inspection, the very idea of supervenience contradicts the analyticity of moral statements.

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