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Problems for moral/natural supervenience

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Abstract: **'Everyone agrees that the moral features of things *supervene* on their natural features' (Smith (1994), 22). Everyone is wrong, or so I will argue. In the first section, I explain the version of moral supervenience that Smith and others argue everyone should accept. In the second section, I argue that the mere conceptual possibility of a divine command theory of morality (DCT) is sufficient to refute the version of moral supervenience under consideration. Lastly, I consider and respond to two objections, showing, among other things, that while DCT is sufficient to refute this version of moral supervenience it is not necessary.**

Introduction

'Everyone agrees that the moral features of things *supervene* on their natural features' (Smith (1994), 22). Everyone is wrong, or so I will argue. In the first section, I explain the version of moral supervenience that Smith and others argue everyone should accept. In the second section, I argue that the mere conceptual possibility of a divine-command theory of morality (DCT) is sufficient to refute the version of moral supervenience defended by Smith and others. As we shall see, while it is true that the conceptual possibility of DCT is enough to show that Smith's claim and others like it are wrong, it is, surprisingly, a bit more difficult to show this than one might initially think. And showing that DCT does indeed present a significant problem for this version of moral supervenience has not been (to my mind at least) sufficiently demonstrated in the literature. For example, in his *Moral Realism: A Defense*, Russ Shafer-Landau offers the following by way of showing that the moral may supervene on more than the natural:

> The question then is whether [natural facts] entirely and exhaustively constitute moral facts. Suppose they don't. Then something else must complement the natural facts. But what could it be? The only possibility, it seems to me, are supernatural facts, facts, most likely, about a God's intentions or conations. Two worlds naturalistically identical could, on such a view, be morally different, in virtue of different divine attitudes taken towards

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> them. … [T]here might be no supernatural facts. But if there are, and something like a divine command theory is correct, then we'd have a coherent tale to tell about what, other than natural facts, confers on something the moral status it possesses. (Shafer-Landau (2003), 75)

Shafer-Landau's brief argument here is simply not enough to stave off the committed defender of moral/natural supervenience. What, the defender may ask, grounds God's attitude if not a difference between the two worlds. If the answer is nothing, then this version of DCT is vulnerable to the arbitrariness objection. One way of construing the arbitrariness objection is as a worry about the very conceptual possibility of DCT. In other words, the arbitrariness objection seeks to show, among other things, that DCT violates certain platitudes governing competent possession and use of moral concepts. But if DCT is conceptually impossible, then this is not a 'coherent tale to tell about what, other than natural facts, confers on something the moral status it possesses'. More is needed to show that the version of moral supervenience under consideration here is false.

In the final section of the paper, I consider and respond to three objections. The first objection challenges the conceptual possibility of DCT. I give two different replies. First, even if DCT is false, as long as God's commands can make a moral difference, moral supervenience is still in trouble. Second, we do not even need God's commands to generate the problem for the version of moral supervenience under consideration. The second objection questions whether the two scenarios given to disprove moral supervenience actually are situations where the moral properties differ despite the presence of identical natural properties. My response appeals to the possibility of culpable ignorance and the fact that some modal properties are not natural properties. The third objection attempts to show that the argument developed against the particular version of moral supervenience considered here begs the question. I respond by reconsidering the dialectic and how to assess it.

Moral/natural supervenience

The version of moral supervenience that will concern us consists of two claims:

(i) Moral properties or relations supervene on natural properties or relations.
(ii) The supervening relation that holds between the moral and the natural is a matter of conceptual necessity.

The version of moral/natural supervenience that is the target in this paper should not be confused with close relatives. For example, versions of moral/natural supervenience that deny that the supervenience relation holds as a matter of

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conceptual necessity or versions that deny that the subvenient base is natural (in the sense spelled out below) would not succumb to the objections I raise in this paper.

Michael Smith characterizes the relevant notion of natural in the following way:[1] 'My suggestion [is] that natural properties are all and only those properties that are such as to figure in empirical regularities, with the further proviso that, in characterizing these properties, we mention no particulars' (Smith (2000), 217). The reason for the ban on particulars is because

> … particularity itself is entirely arbitrary, from the evaluative point of view. The fact that my life is Michael Smith's life, say, cannot be what makes mine a good life or a bad life, because it could make such a difference only if being Michael Smith's life was somehow a special feature of a life, a feature that is special in a way that being Joe Blogg's life or John Doe's life is not. (*ibid.*, 214)

Another way to state Smith's ban is in terms of the distinction between pure and impure properties.[2] A pure property is a property that does not involve or is not about a particular, while an impure property does involve or is about a particular. For example, properties like *being identical to Julian* essentially involve a particular. Thus, the property *being identical to Julian* is an impure property. Smith's pure property limitation is meant to be understood as one on features that make essential reference to some substance. That is, according to Smith, it rules out cases where Angel has a moral obligation to φ and Julian does not, and the only difference between Angel and Julian is that Angel is Angel and Julian is not Angel. There must be some further non-impure property difference that serves as the underlier here. With this distinction in hand we can now state Smith's characterization of natural properties plus his proviso a bit more succinctly. A property is a natural property in the relevant sense just in case it is a pure property that is such as to figure in empirical regularities. In what follows I shall assume Smith's notion of a natural property.

Michael Smith clearly endorses (i) and (ii):

> Everyone agrees that the moral features of things *supervene* on their natural features. That is, everyone agrees that two possible worlds that are alike in all of their natural features must also be alike in their moral features; that the moral features of things cannot float free of their natural features. Moreover, everyone agrees that this is a platitude; that it is an *a priori* truth. For recognition of the way in which the moral supervenes on the natural is a constraint on the proper use of moral concepts. (Smith (1994), 22).

Smith's claim is that two worlds that are identical in all of their natural features must be identical in their moral features.[3] If S judges that some world w is better than some world w^*, then S should, as a matter of conceptual necessity, believe that there is some natural difference between w and w^*. If upon investigation, S is unwilling or simply cannot cite a relevant natural difference between w and w^* then S should – conceptually should – withdraw the claim that w is better than

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*w**. If S doesn't and continues to refuse to cite a relevant natural difference between *w* and *w**, S is thereby incompetent with moral concepts. Similarly Alexander Miller writes, 'someone who self-consciously gave differing moral evaluations of two acts or events without thinking that he had to point to some natural difference between those acts or events would be displaying his lack of competence with moral concepts' (Miller (2003), 32).[4]

Given the conceptual constraint that moral supervenience is supposed to place on our use of moral concepts, anyone who flouts it is guilty of some conceptual confusion. This point is important since the conceptual constraint of the moral supervening on the natural (hereafter, 'moral supervenience') is absent in other types of supervenience relations. Jones does not express a conceptual confusion if he is a Cartesian dualist. If it is true that the mental supervenes on the physical, this supervenience relation is not a conceptual necessity. While Cartesians may be wrong, they are not guilty of incompetence with mental concepts.[5]

Moral supervenience (like other supervenience relations) can be weak, strong, or global. Smith defends global moral supervenience. According to Smith 'two possible worlds alike in all of their natural features must also be alike in their moral features'. This is global supervenience because the relation compares entire worlds.[6]

For weak moral supervenience, two situations, acts, events, persons, etc. in the same world that are alike in all of their natural features must also be alike in their moral features. Thus, if situation S in *w* has moral feature M and natural feature N, and situation S* in *w* has N, then S* must also have M. Like its global cousin, weak moral supervenience is supposed to express a moral platitude or conceptual truth.[7] Thus, it should be conceptually impossible for competent users of moral language to deny weak moral supervenience.

Lastly, for strong moral supervenience, two situations, acts, events, persons, etc. in the same or different possible worlds that are alike in all of their natural features must also be alike in their moral features. One can easily see that if weak moral supervenience is false, then strong moral supervenience is false. If two situations within the same world could differ in moral properties while remaining identical in natural properties, then two situations in different worlds could differ in moral properties while remaining identical in natural properties. Thus, a refutation of both weak and global moral supervenience is sufficient to show that the moral supervenience thesis is false.[8] In the next section, we'll see why both weak and global moral supervenience are not conceptually necessary.

The conceptual possibility of divine-command theories of morality

Perhaps the best route against the moral supervenience thesis is to construct two naturally identical situations in either the same world or across worlds

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where the moral properties fail to be the same. To show this is a conceptual possibility, consider the following two cases:[9]

Case 1: Ron and Don are qualitatively identical. Both had the same upbringing, are psychologically identical, in the same environment, etc. Ron and Don, as it turns out, have both been called to serve as ministers of God's love. Due to their qualitative identity, their identical callings and the shortage of ministers in their home town as well as in China, God commands Ron to serve as minister in his home town and Don to serve as a missionary to China and not as minister in his home town.

Case 2: In world *w* God calls the children of Israel to be his people. One of the ways God decides to separate His people is by commanding them to set apart one day a week as a day of rest. God commands Israel to rest on Saturday or the last day of the week. In world *w** God calls the children of Israel to be his people. One of the ways God decides to separate His people is by commanding them to set apart one day a week as a day of rest. God commands Israel to rest on Sunday or the first day of the week. As it happens *w* and *w** are naturally identical.

In the two cases, natural identity does not entail moral identity, given the bare possibility of a property-identity version of a divine-command theory of morality (DCT). According to this version of DCT the property *being commanded by God* is identical to the property *being obligatory*. It is important to remember that what is needed in order to show that moral supervenience is false is simply the conceptual possibility of this version of DCT.[10]

In Case 1 Ron and Don are world mates. It is reasonable to think that if God exists He can call one person to minister to a local church and another to be a missionary to China, despite the fact that the two persons do not differ in any relevant natural feature.[11] If Ron serves as a minister to China, he does something wrong, whereas if Don serves as a minister to China, he does something right. Hence, a moral difference does not entail a natural difference.

Case 2 represents a violation of global moral supervenience. The two worlds have identical natural features, yet moral supervenience fails to hold. If the children of Israel in *w* work on Saturday, then they have done something wrong, whereas if the children of Israel in *w** work on Saturday, they have not done something wrong. Hence, global moral supervenience is false.

It seems safe to conclude that moral supervenience, understood as (i) and (ii), is in trouble. If global or weak moral supervenience is true, then it should be conceptually impossible for there to be two situations or two worlds that are naturally identical but morally different. Both cases reveal that the consequent is

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false. It is conceptually possible for there to be two situations or two worlds that are naturally identical and morally different.

Objections

I can think of three strategies for objecting to my argument against moral supervenience. According to the first, DCT is conceptually impossible. According to the second, neither Case 1 nor Case 2 represent naturally identical scenarios. There is a relevant natural difference in both cases. According to the third strategy, my argument against moral supervenience begs the question.

Objection 1

The most obvious objection to my case against moral supervenience is to cast doubt on the conceptual possibility of the version of DCT outlined above. Consider the following objection to DCT: DCT must allow for the possibility that murder is right. Since murder is not antecedently wrong, God could command murder. But clearly murder could never be right. Thus, moral rightness cannot depend for its instantiation on God's commands.

One way to understand this objection is by considering it in light of moral supervenience. Since DCT violates moral supervenience, it implies that moral properties could obtain independently of a situation's natural features. That is, while the property of wrongness may in fact be present in every case of murder, on DCT, things could have been otherwise. But, the objection goes, things could not have been otherwise. Thus, DCT is false. And since DCT is subject to this objection, divine-command theorists must be conceptually confused.

Reply Stated baldly DCT is subject to the above objection. Thus, at least some versions of DCT may be guilty of conceptual confusion. I doubt that this applies to all versions. For example, those versions of DCT that appeal to the nature of God – specifically God's love or God's goodness – can, it seems, deny that acts such as murder could have been right, since God's love or goodness necessarily excludes this possibility. Thus, instead of the property *being obligatory* being identical to *being commanded by God* the property *being obligatory* is identical to *being commanded by a loving God* (or *being commanded by a good God*).

For some, a DCT which yields the normative properties of our two cases will be conceptually possible. In other words, some will find the above version of DCT together with the two cases conceptually possible. But others will baulk at such a possibility. For them, we can raise the same objection without relying on DCT.

What is required for the objection to moral supervenience is the following conceptual possibility: at least two situations where the natural facts (i.e. the facts that only mention empirical regularities and pure properties) are qualitatively identical and the moral facts diverge. Theorists who reject DCT can accept that in

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some cases God's commands make a moral difference. Thus, one could accept that in most cases, God's commands are neither necessary nor sufficient for the obtaining of deontological properties while in some cases they are. Indeed, someone who rejects DCT but thinks that God's commands can make a moral difference could embrace my two cases.

The two cases represent situations in which the natural features underdetermine the moral features. Facts involving impure properties are morally significant in the two cases. That is, impure properties figure essentially in the descriptions of the two cases. In the first case the natural features alone cannot determine who should go to China and who should remain at home. God's command is needed. In the second case, the natural features cannot determine the day on which rest from work should be taken. Again, God's command is needed. So, while my presentation of the objection to moral supervenience used DCT, the objection is not necessarily dependent upon the claim that DCT is conceptually possible. Instead I can appeal the following principle: for situations where the natural features alone underdetermine some moral feature God's command is needed, otherwise God's command is not needed. Thus, in those cases where the natural features underdetermine the moral features it is conceptually possible that *being obligatory* is identical to *being commanded by a loving God*.[12] I can still use the objection with those who find DCT conceptually impossible.

For those who believe that God's existence is conceptually impossible there is still a way to wield the spirit of the objection to moral supervenience. We have considered cases with the following structure: A commands S to φ and S* not to φ. S and S* are naturally identical (they are pure property duplicates). S has the property of being obligated to φ. S* has the property of being obligated not to φ. S and S* differ in their moral features. Notice that any moral theory that allows that the commands of *someone* are sufficient, at least *sometimes*, for the obtaining of deontological properties will allow for the conceptual possibility of cases where identical natural features do not imply identical moral features.[13] Hence, it is possible for someone to maintain that God's existence is conceptually impossible and continue to use the structure of the argument in this paper against moral supervenience.

Objection 2

This objection denies that the cases I have described are in fact cases where there are no natural differences between the relevant parties.[14] For convenience, I'll focus on the first case but the objection easily applies *mutatis mutandis* to the other case.

Recall the case of Ron and Don. By hypothesis, Ron and Don are naturally identical. Ron is commanded by God to φ, while Don is commanded by God not to φ. Hence, the moral does not supervene on the natural. In this case it is right for

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Ron to φ and wrong for Don to φ, despite the fact that Ron and Don are naturally identical. Moral supervenience refuted.

Not so fast, says the objector. There is a natural difference between Ron and Don. Consider the mental state that Ron and Don are in at the time they recognize God's commands to them. Since God's commands to Ron and Don are different, they recognize different commands. Hence, the mental states of Ron and Don are different. But being in different mental states is a natural difference. Hence, Ron and Don are not, contrary to the assumption, naturally identical.

Reply The command can precede recognition of the command. Since the command is the moral obligation, a moral obligation can precede the recognition of a moral obligation. Thus, it is possible for Ron and Don to be under different obligations and for Ron and Don to be in the exact same mental state. If this reply is adequate, then it must be possible for Ron and Don to be under different obligations without having any awareness of the content of the obligations. If Ron and Don are aware of the content of their different obligations, then they are in different mental states. But is it possible for Ron and Don to be under different obligations without being aware of the content of the obligations? Given the possibility of culpable ignorance, it does seem possible. Thus, Ron is under the obligation to φ and Don is under the obligation not to φ, both Ron and Don are naturally identical and neither Ron nor Don is aware of their respective obligations.

Of course, it must be possible for Ron to become aware of his obligation and for Don to become aware of his. That is, Ron has the property of possibly becoming aware that he is obligated to φ and Don has the property of possibly becoming aware that he is obligated not to φ. These different modal properties of Ron and Don, however, are not natural properties and thus do not establish a natural difference. The moral properties that Ron has in this world are supposed to supervene on the natural properties that Ron has in this world. In this world Ron does not have the natural property of being aware that he is obligated to φ. Rather, Ron has the property of being aware that he is obligated to φ in some other, nearby, world. Furthermore, the modal properties are impure. They are about or involve a particular.

Objection 3

The final objection to be considered is that my argument begs the question against the defender of moral supervenience. In order to see this it's best to set the stage a bit. There is either a natural or a non-moral difference between the two worlds (or the two individuals) in the cases presented above. If there is a natural difference between the two worlds (or the two individuals), then the argument against moral supervenience clearly fails. If there is a non-moral difference between the two worlds (or two individuals) then the argument against

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moral supervenience clearly fails. Hence, either way the argument against moral supervenience clearly fails. The first disjunct was dealt with in the reply to the second objection. In support of the second disjunct, the objector argues that God's commands are different in each world. Hence, there is a non-moral (and non-natural) difference between the worlds.

I think that the materials to respond to this objection have already been laid down in the first two sections of the paper. First, it is important to remember that the target of this paper is the claim that the moral supervenes on the natural as a matter of conceptual necessity. Hence, the target of this paper is not the claim that the moral supervenes on the non-moral as a matter of conceptual necessity. Nor is the target of this paper the claim that the moral supervenes on the natural as a matter of metaphysical but not conceptual necessity (or non-conceptual necessity). If the best response to the argument presented in this paper is that moral supervenience should be understood as the claim that the moral supervenes on the non-moral as a matter of conceptual necessity, then the paper has done what it set out to do. Or if the best response to the argument presented in this paper is that moral supervenience should be understood as the claim that the moral supervenes on the natural as a matter of metaphysical but not conceptual necessity (I doubt that this is the best response), then the paper has done what it set out to do.

Second, it is important to remember that the version of DCT that is considered in this paper is the property-identity version. According to the property-identity version of DCT, the property of being morally obligatory is identical to the property of being commanded by God. The assumption throughout the paper is that this is a conceptually possible thesis (it may be false but it's not conceptually incoherent). Indeed, I can weaken the assumption. Instead of assuming that the property-identity version of DCT is conceptually possible one can read the paper as attempting to establish the following conditional: if the property-identity version of DCT is conceptually possible, then moral supervenience is false.

At this point one might be concerned that the paper simply begs the question against moral supervenience. I ask you to consider worlds that are naturally identical but morally different. According to moral supervenience, such worlds are conceptually impossible. The dialectic is, however, a bit more complicated than that. What I ask you to consider are two worlds identical in all of their natural features (where again a natural feature is understood as pure feature that is such as to figure in empirical regularities) but differing in some divine command. This I submit you can do without any conceptual difficulty. I then introduce the hypothesis that divine commands and moral obligations are identical. This I submit you can do without any conceptual difficulty (see the Philip Quinn quotation, n. 10).

My claim is simply that the conjunction of those two conceptual possibilities is also a conceptual possibility. If that's right, then the version of moral

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supervenience under consideration here is false. If it's not right, then this version of moral supervenience is unscathed by my argument. Conceptual possibility strikes me as easy to come by. The moral supervenience defender needs to show that the conjunction of the above two conceptual possibilities is not conceptually possible. Simply repeating moral supervenience at this stage in the dialectic is not adequate.

Conclusion

Defenders of moral supervenience claim that it is conceptually necessary that a change in moral features requires a change in natural features. Denying moral supervenience reveals conceptual confusion. From this we can infer that any moral theory that denies moral supervenience is conceptually impossible. However, the conceptual possibility of DCT or indeed any theory of morality that is consistent with the claim that someone's commands can be moral obligations implies the falsity of moral supervenience. Since at least one of these theories appears to be conceptually possible, it seems safe to conclude that this version of moral supervenience is not as obvious as its defenders claim.[15]

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Notes

1. Michael Smith is one of just a few philosophers who take the trouble to spell out what they mean by 'natural' in the phrase natural property. I take it as obvious that Smith's notion of natural is not coextensive with non-moral. Thus, to say that the moral supervenes on the natural as a matter of conceptual necessity is different from saying that the moral supervenes on the non-moral as a matter of conceptual necessity. I am sure that a number of philosophers use 'natural' in their formulations of moral supervenience as coextensive with the non-moral. Nevertheless, there are a number of philosophers who use 'natural' in a way that is closer to Smith's (see the Shafer-Landau quotation above and notes 4 and 5 below).

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2. See Menzel (1991), 489, and Loux (2002), 115.
3. Note that this way of putting it circumvents some obvious objections. For example, Nicholas Sturgeon has suggested that a world with only God is a world in which supervenience is violated. However, it is not clear that such a world contains any natural properties at all. Hence, moral supervenience is trivially satisfied.
4. Miller (2003).
5. Nick Zangwill writes, 'In reconstructing what Moore had in mind (or what he nearly had in mind, or what he ought to have had in mind), I shall explicitly pull apart the metaphysical and epistemological aspects of his claim. Moral supervenience, Moore thinks, is an essential characteristic of moral properties *and* it is an essential characteristic of our thought about moral properties. Thus, putting these together, we get the claim that we know, a priori, that moral properties supervene on natural properties'; Zangwill (2005), 126. A little later Zangwill adds, '[M]oral supervenience is a priori. It is a fundamental a priori conceptual constraint governing all moral thought, a constraint that holds in virtue of the nature of moral properties. The constraint falls out of the requirement to be consistent, which is constitutive of thinking in moral terms'; *ibid.*
6. As Jaegwon Kim (1989) points out with respect to an analogous supervenience claim in philosophy of mind, two possible worlds that differ in some minute detail in their subvening properties could radically differ in their supervening properties, while still satisfying the supervenience relation. That is, if w and w^* are identical in every respect except that w has one more atom than w^* then w and w^* could be completely different in their moral properties. Obviously, qualifications to global moral supervenience are needed.
7. Admittedly, local moral supervenience still suffers from the same problem raised above for global moral supervenience. Two situations alike in all natural respects except that in one there is an additional atom would entail the possibility that the situations are completely morally different. For our purposes, clarifying the notion of moral supervenience in this regard is not necessary since I will present counter-examples to both global and local moral supervenience.
8. Strong supervenience entails global supervenience. Some theorists have suggested that the converse does not hold, though this is controversial. However, the issues that figure into the debate about whether or not global supervenience entails strong supervenience (issues having to do with the best way to formulate physicalism) do not appear to be present for moral supervenience. If that's right, then a conceptually possible case that violates weak supervenience is sufficient to show that moral supervenience is false. Nevertheless, it is instructive to consider a case that violates global supervenience.
9. The two cases assume that it is possible for God to command act-types and act-tokens. The latter (act-tokens) help illustrate why Smith's ban on impure properties should be lifted.
10. Of course, other versions of DCT may be more plausible (e.g. versions that deny the identity between God's commands and obligations opting instead for some kind of non-reductive constitution or asymmetric causal dependence). But the fact – if it is one – that there are more plausible versions than the one above is not to the point. So long as a property-identity version of DCT is conceptually possible, moral supervenience is in trouble. Here's Philip Quinn, a leading advocate of a non-identity version of theological voluntarism on property-identity divine-command theory: 'In a divine command theory of ethical wrongness, Robert M. Adams has proposed the relation of property identity … . Though I know of no decisive argument against this proposal, I do not find it attractive'; Quinn (2005), 69.
11. Notice that in both cases impure properties are carrying significant moral weight.
12. Here's another way to express the principle at work: for all x, x's being a command of God = x's being obligatory if, and only if, the natural features of the situation (or world) underdetermine the moral features.
13. For example, let crude cultural relativism be the thesis that cultural approval is sufficient for the instantiation of moral rightness and cultural disapproval is sufficient for the instantiation of moral wrongness. Given the conceptual possibility of crude cultural relativism, the following seems possible. Some culture approves of S's φing and a naturally identical culture disapproves of S*'s φing, where S and S* are also naturally identical. Cases like this will arise if we allow that it is possible for the natural features to underdetermine what can and cannot be approved. And it seems that we should allow for this. The same kinds of cases could arise for social contract theory and for an ideal-observer theory of moral obligation.

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14. Thanks to Evan Fales for bringing this objection to my attention.
15. J. Todd Buras (Baylor University) and Evan Fales (University of Iowa) provided outstanding feedback on earlier versions of this paper. Many thanks to both of them. I'd also like to thank Jay Bruce, Daniel Johnson, and Jonathan Sands-Wise for discussing with me some of the issues mentioned in the paper. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2007 Central Division meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers. Thanks to all those present at that meeting. Lastly, thanks to the Calvin College Philosophy Faculty, the Editor, and an anonymous referee for this journal.

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