# Reply to Almeida

**MARK C. MURPHY**

*Department of Philosophy, Georgetown University, 215 New North,
Washington, DC 20057*

**Abstract:**   Michael J. Almeida offers two criticisms of the argument of my
'A trilemma for divine command theory'. The first criticism is that I mistakenly
assume the validity of the following inference pattern: property A is identical
to property B; property B supervenes on property C; therefore, property A
supervenes on property C. The second criticism is that I have misinterpreted the
moral-supervenience thesis upon which I rely in making this argument. The first
of Almeida's criticisms is completely untenable. The second of his criticisms casts
doubt on my argument, a doubt that I can mitigate but not entirely dispel.

In 'A trilemma for divine command theory', I provided an argument
against property-identity divine-command theory, or PDCT: the claim that the
property *being morally obligatory* is identical with the property *being commanded
by God*.[1] The argument is that three claims – first, PDCT; second, that moral
properties supervene on non-moral properties; and third, that God's commands
are sometimes free – form a trilemma: accepting any two of them requires the
rejection of the third. As the moral supervenience and free command theses are
unlikely to be rejected, the upshot is that PDCT ought to be denied.

Here is the main argument that these three theses form a trilemma: assume
that [PDCT] is true and that the moral strongly supervenes on the non-moral.

> *Being obligatory* thus strongly[2] supervenes on the non-moral. Necessarily, then,
> whether an act is obligatory is wholly fixed by a set of properties that does not include
> *being obligatory*. Now, if [PDCT] is true, then *being obligatory* just is *being commanded
> by God*. And so, by substitution, necessarily, whether an act is commanded by God is
> wholly fixed by a set of properties that does not include *being commanded by God*. It
> thus follows from the conjunction of [PDCT] and the supervenience of the moral on
> the non-moral that God's commands are wholly fixed by features of the world other
> than those commands themselves. But to accept this last claim is to reject God's
> freedom in commanding.[3]

I read Michael J. Almeida as offering two criticisms of this argument.[4] The first
criticism is that I mistakenly assume the validity of the following inference

pattern: property A is identical to property B; property B supervenes on property C; therefore, property A supervenes on property C. The second criticism is that I have misinterpreted the moral-supervenience thesis upon which I rely in making this argument. I think that the first of Almeida's criticisms is completely untenable. The second of his criticisms casts doubt on my argument, a doubt that I can mitigate but not entirely dispel.

### Almeida's first criticism

Almeida denies that one can rely on a principle of substitutivity of metaphysical identicals when one is dealing with supervenience claims. I find this denial astonishing. One would have thought that it is a sure mark of a successful argument that it requires those who would reject it to deny Leibniz's Law. But that is what Almeida is advocating as a means for the defender of PDCT to escape the trilemma.

What could be more obvious? If A exhibits some property, and A is identical with B, then B will exhibit that property. If A exhibits some supervenience property – being such that C supervenes on it, or being such that it supervenes on D – and A is identical with B, then B will exhibit that supervenience property as well. This is so plain that it is hardly worth arguing for. The most that we can do is to see why Almeida thinks that we ought to deny it, and to show that his basis for thinking this is mistaken.

Almeida's argument is by counterexample: using unrestricted substitution we can prove that *being water* supervenes on *being $H_2O$* if and only if *being $H_2O$* supervenes on *being water*. But that is true only if the relation of supervenience is symmetric. Since the relation of supervenience is not symmetric this inference is not valid. And so the unrestricted substitution of metaphysical identicals results in invalid inferences.[5]

Almeida is arguing, I take it, that allowing substitution of metaphysical identicals into supervenience claims would result in the drawing of false conclusions from true premises. *Being water* supervenes on *being $H_2O$*, and *being water* just is *being $H_2O$*, so if we allow the propriety of substituting metaphysical identicals into supervenience theses it would follow that *being $H_2O$* supervenes on *being water*. Which is both false, Almeida says, and contradicts the point that supervenience is not a symmetric relation.

But this is entirely unpersuasive. Once we allow that supervenience is a reflexive relationship – a conclusion with which Almeida has no quarrel[6] – it is obvious that *being $H_2O$ does* supervene on *being water*. (Any argument that *being $H_2O$* does not supervene on *being water* would be an argument that *being $H_2O$* is not the same property as *being water*, or that the notion of supervenience that Almeida and I are both working with is false.) And to hold that substitutivity of identicals is a valid inference rule in this or any other supervenience context is not to fly in the

face of the non-symmetry of the supervenience relationship. That it is false that, for all *a* and all *b*, if *a* supervenes on *b* then *b* supervenes on *a* does not of course give any reason to doubt that, for some *a* and some *b*, if *a* supervenes on *b*, then *b* supervenes on *a*.

Almeida has a better argument to offer. It is, in effect, that I mischaracterize the doctrine of moral supervenience. It is less clear whether I can answer his criticism on this point.

### Almeida's second criticism

Almeida's second criticism – which he rightly calls 'more serious'[7] – is that I have interpreted the moral supervenience thesis in a way that is clearly inadequate. In making the main argument of the paper I assume that the moral supervenience thesis is to be formulated as the claim that moral properties supervene on non-moral properties, where 'moral' and 'non-moral' name two mutually exclusive classes of properties. This understanding is what allows me to argue as follows: given the assumptions that *being obligatory* is non-negotiably a moral property and that *being obligatory* is identical with *being commanded by God*, it follows that *being commanded by God* is a moral property; and thus *being commanded by God* is not one of the non-moral properties on which *being obligatory* supervenes.

Almeida is not, I think, challenging the view that the classes of moral and non-moral properties are mutually exclusive. What Almeida means to challenge is my way of putting the supervenience thesis. Why think that the supervenience thesis ought to be formulated in terms of the supervenience of moral properties on non-moral properties, rather than on some other class of properties? The importance of this possibility for the trilemma argument against PDCT is that if the moral supervenience thesis is plausibly formulated only in a way that does not entail that the set of moral properties and the set of properties on which moral properties supervene are mutually exclusive, then the argument would fail: the assumption that *being obligatory* is identical with *being commanded by God* might not remove *being commanded by God* from that class of properties on which *being obligatory* supervenes. (Call this the 'no-entailed-exclusion' condition.) Of course, it is *also* important to formulate the thesis in a way that does not entail that moral properties fall into that class of properties on which moral properties are supposed to supervene. If the thesis were thus formulated (to take a boring example: if the thesis were formulated as 'moral properties supervene on properties') then, via the reflexivity of supervenience, the moral supervenience thesis would be vacuous. (Call this the 'no-entailed-inclusion' condition.)

Is the moral supervenience thesis plausibly formulated in a way that satisfies both the no-entailed-exclusion and no-entailed-inclusion condition? Almeida

would say 'Yes'. Appealing to the work of Frank Jackson, Almeida writes that we should say that moral properties supervene on *descriptive* properties.[8] Perhaps this is so. But permit me to register my doubts that we can give sense to the notion of a 'descriptive property' that satisfies both the no-entailed-exclusion and no-entailed-inclusion conditions. We cannot use criteria that pick out moral properties, and then just negate at least one of them, in order to say what descriptive properties are: that would violate, again, the no-entailed-exclusion condition, and the trilemma argument would go through. On the other hand: we cannot use criteria that are so general that it is clear that moral properties plausibly fall in that class. Jackson's own response is simply to go by example, and intuitively.[9] But this is a bit puzzling. We begin by identifying some class of descriptive properties by example. But now someone asks: 'Does it follow from your identifying a property as descriptive that it is not a moral property?' If 'Yes', then my argument works. If 'No', then I want to know why I should not include *being obligatory* in the list of descriptive properties. After all, if someone were to ask me to describe an act of, say, torturing children, I would use moral vocabulary to characterize it just as readily as I would use non-moral vocabulary. (I would have similar misgivings about using 'natural' properties as those on which moral properties are held to supervene.)

Now, one might say that I *must* be wrong to harbour scruples about this. For if I understand moral supervenience as being supervenience on non-moral properties, then I rule out in advance the prospect of offering an informative property identification with respect to moral properties. But that is just not so. Nothing precludes the possibility of offering an identification of *being obligatory* with some property otherwise described – so long as that property otherwise described supervenes on a class of properties that does not include itself. So: suppose that one wants to identify the property *being morally right* with the property *being pleasure-maximizing*. The argument I have offered against PDCT does not call this possibility into question, for the property *being pleasure-maximizing* surely supervenes on a class of properties that does not include it. Thus the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral would in that case be unproblematically preserved.

The considerations I offer in response to Almeida's second line of criticism do not constitute an argument that the moral supervenience thesis can be formulated only in the way that I formulate it: as a relationship between two mutually exclusive sets of properties. But it is a challenge to those who wish to formulate it otherwise: the appeal to mutually exclusive classes of properties provides a clear sense to the moral supervenience thesis while also preserves its status as non-vacuous. Unless the challenge is met, the trilemma argument against PDCT remains undefeated.

One final point. The argument against PDCT as I formulate it appeals to moral supervenience, and inherits all the puzzles about how the doctrine of moral

supervenience is to be interpreted. But one can see some of the force of the argument, I think, without formulating it in terms of some specific account of moral supervenience. One need simply ask the following. *Ex ante*, is it plausible that the property *being obligatory* might be instantiated, or not instantiated, while every other distinct property instantiated remains the same? *Ex ante*, is it plausible that the property *being commanded by God* might be instantiated, or not instantiated, while every other distinct property instantiated remains the same? If one says 'No' to the former, as most of us would, and one says 'Yes' to the latter, as most of us would, then one faces the tension to which I was trying to draw attention in the trilemma argument, regardless of one's views on how precisely to formulate the doctrine of moral supervenience.

### Notes

1. Mark C. Murphy 'A trilemma for divine command theory', *Faith and Philosophy*, **19** (2002), 22–31.
2. Both Almeida and I rely on Kim's understanding of strong supervenience: a set of properties A strongly supervenes on a set of properties B if and only if 'Necessarily, for any object $x$ and any property F in A, if $x$ has F, then there exists a property G in B such that $x$ has G, and necessarily if any $y$ has G, it has F.' See Jaegwon Kim 'Concepts of supervenience', in *idem Supervenience and Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 53–78, 64.
3. Murphy 'A trilemma for divine command theory', 25. The argument also appears in my *An Essay on Divine Authority* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 87.
4. Michael J. Almeida, 'Supervenience and property-identical divine-command theory', *Religious Studies*, **40** (2004), 323–333.
5. *Ibid.*, 328.
6. The reflexivity of supervenience follows from Kim's definition; see n. 2.
7. Almeida 'Supervenience and property-identical divine-command theory', 329.
8. See *ibid.*, 330; Almeida is relying on Frank Jackson's *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 118–125.
9. *Ibid.*, 120.