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GLOBAL SUPERVeniENCE, COINCIDENT ENTITIES AND ANTI-INDIVIDUALISM

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ABSTRACT. Theodore Sider distinguishes two notions of global supervenience: strong global supervenience and weak global supervenience. He then discusses some applications to general metaphysical questions. Most interestingly, Sider employs the weak notion in order to undermine a familiar argument against coincident distinct entities. In what follows, I reexamine the two notions and distinguish them from a third, intermediate, notion (intermediate global supervenience). I argue that (a) weak global supervenience is not an adequate notion of dependence; (b) weak global supervenience does not capture certain assumptions about coincidence relations; (c) these assumptions are better accommodated by the stronger notion of intermediate global supervenience; (d) intermediate global supervenience, however, is also not an adequate notion of dependence; and (e) strong global supervenience is an adequate notion of dependence. It also fits in with anti-individualism about the mental. It does not, however, serve to rebut arguments against coincident entities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Global supervenience is of much interest to anti-individualists. Global supervenience, it is thought, can accommodate the idea that an individual’s mental properties do not depend entirely on his or her ‘local’ physical structure, but also on the physical environment.¹ Theodore Sider (1999) argues that a version of global supervenience can also accommodate the idea that there are coincident distinct entities, for example, entities that do not differ in any of their momentary properties and relations, but do differ in their modal properties. Specifically, Sider distinguishes two notions of global supervenience – strong global supervenience and weak global supervenience – and contends that the weak notion can be used to rebut an argument against coincident entities, namely, the argument that coincident entities violate the requirement that the modal be

grounded in the non-modal. Sider demonstrates that the requirement need not be violated if ‘grounded’ is understood in terms of weak global supervenience.

My aim in this paper is to assess whether notions of global supervenience can indeed establish claims about coincident entities and about anti-individualism. In section 2, I discuss weak global supervenience, arguing that it is doubtful that weak global supervenience is an adequate notion of dependence, and that weak global supervenience does not capture central assumptions about coincident entities. In section 3, I introduce another kind of global supervenience, intermediate between weak and global supervenience, to which I give the name ‘intermediate global supervenience’. This notion is of interest for two reasons. First, like weak global supervenience, intermediate global supervenience is consistent with coincident entities. In fact, it better accommodates central assumptions about coincident entities than does weak global supervenience. And second, intermediate global supervenience is more likely to count, intuitively, as an adequate notion of dependence. In particular, it is not subject to objections that have been raised regarding weak global supervenience. Despite these virtues, even intermediate global supervenience may not count as an adequate notion of dependence. For that, we have to move up to strong global supervenience. In section 4, I argue that strong global supervenience is an adequate notion of dependence, and is consistent with anti-individualism with respect to the mental. However, strong global supervenience cannot rebut the arguments against coincident entities.

2. WEAK GLOBAL SUPERVENIENCE

Supervenience is a relation between sets A and B of properties and relations. Notions of supervenience come in local and global flavors. The local notions concern the relations between the A-properties and B-properties of an object. They assert that A supervenes on B just in case any two objects that are B-indiscernible (i.e., have exactly the same B-properties) are also A-indiscernible. Local supervenience comes in two sub-flavors, weak and strong. The weak version of local supervenience requires that B-indiscernible