

GLOBAL RESPONSE-DEPENDENCE AND NOUMENAL REALISM

A response-dependent concept is a concept defined via reference to the psychological responses of suitably situated subjects (Johnston 1989, 1993; Pettit 1990). For example, something is red, according to the response-dependent account of that concept, if and only if it would look red to suitable subjects under suitable conditions; something is uncomfortable, according to the response-dependent account of that concept, if and only if it causes the discomfort of suitable subjects in suitable conditions; and so we might go on.

Global Response-Dependence is the generalization of this idea. According to Global Response-Dependence, every concept is a response-dependent concept, or is defined in terms of concepts which are themselves response-dependent concepts (from here on we will omit this second disjunct). Global Response-Dependence is not the empirical claim that every concept people *in fact* possess is a response-dependent concept—as though they might have possessed some response-independent concepts but, through some accident of history or learning, systematically failed to do so. Rather the thesis purports to tell us an *a priori* truth about the nature of concepts as such. It tells us, if you like, that the concept of a response-independent concept is incoherent. There are no response-independent concepts for people to so much as possess.

Why would anyone believe Global Response-Dependence? Philip Pettit, for one, has argued that Global Response-Dependence follows from the rule-following considerations (Pettit 1989; 1993). Take a concept that certain things fall under: F, say. What is it about people that makes it the case that they possess F as opposed to G, or as opposed to some other concept altogether? Pettit's answer is that those who possess F have "certain habits of response" in common (Pettit 1993: p. 198). More precisely, they would find various things—things which fall under F as opposed to G—

Noumenal Realism does not have many adherents these days. It would therefore be surprising if we could show that, when it is combined with very plausible additional premises, Global Response-Dependence entails Noumenal Realism. It would be surprising because, as we have already said, Global Response-Dependence is a thesis that *does* have adherents. Our aim in this paper, however, is to show that this is indeed the case. Anyone who believes Global Response-Dependence must also believe Noumenal Realism.

1. From Global Response-Dependence to Noumenal Realism

We said that Global Response-Dependence entails Noumenal Realism, at least on plausible assumptions. The most important of these plausible assumptions is a claim about the metaphysics of dispositions.

Grounds: Every disposition has a non-dispositional explanatory ground.

According to Grounds, if a sugar cube is soluble then there is some non-dispositional property of the sugar cube that makes it the case that it is soluble, the property that causes the sugar cube to dissolve when it is in water; if a vase is fragile then there is some non-dispositional property of the vase that makes it the case that it is fragile, the property that causes it to break when struck; and so on and so forth. With the help of Grounds the argument for our conclusion can now be stated rather briefly.²

According to Global Response-Dependence, the only claims we can ever make about the world are claims about the dispositions it possesses to elicit certain responses in us. On the other hand, however, it follows from Grounds that even if these dispositional claims are the only ones we are in a position to make, we do know, in addition, that they cannot be the *only* truths about the world. For if the world is a certain way dispositionally it must also be a certain way in and of itself: that is, a certain way non-dispositionally. If this is right, however, it follows that the world must be a certain way in and of itself—that is, non-dispositionally—quite irrespective of the fact that we are in no position to make claims about this way that it is. But the idea that the world is a certain way in and of itself, even though we are in no position to make claims about the way it is, is, of course, simply the central and defining idea behind Noumenal Realism. So what we have here is an argument to the effect that Global Response-

ultimate constituents of matter—perhaps force, mass, impenetrability, electric charge. But these properties themselves seem to be thoroughly dispositional in character. . . . (Strawson 1980: p. 280)

Strawson thus identifies the prejudice Evans describes as a prejudice against the idea of *bare* dispositions: that is, dispositions which, though they may serve to ground all of the other dispositional properties possessed by objects, are yet themselves quite groundless. Strawson thinks that this is a prejudice because he is attracted to the following theory on more or less scientific grounds.

Bare Dispositions Theory: At the most fundamental ontological level objects have dispositions not in virtue of having some non-dispositional property, and indeed not in virtue of anything else either, but simply as such.

But clearly if the Bare Dispositions Theory is true, then Grounds is false. Grounds entails, after all, that every disposition has a non-dispositional explanatory ground, whereas the Bare Dispositions Theory entails, on the other hand, that some dispositions have no grounds at all.

This means that in order to defend our suggestion that Global Response-Dependence entails Noumenal Realism we will need to establish that the Bare Dispositions Theory is false, or at least to suggest that Grounds is more plausible than the Bare Dispositions Theory. Only so will we have shown that our argument is founded on more than a mere conceptual prejudice. But is it possible to mount a convincing argument for the claim that dispositional properties require a grounding in non-dispositional properties? We will consider two lines of argument. The first derives from the idea that the very conception of a disposition precludes the truth of the Bare Dispositions Theory. The second derives from the idea that, when properly understood, the Bare Dispositions Theory is incompatible with a very plausible thesis about the semantics of dispositional statements.

3. *The Very Conception of a Disposition*

One reason for rejecting the Bare Dispositions Theory is that some conceptions of what a disposition is directly entail Grounds. Suppose, for example, that an object's disposition to emit middle C when struck is the

a red chair in Fred's living room on 27 February 1997 is at best contingently true. It is at best contingently true because the chair might not have been there, and also because the chair might have been there without being such as to look red to normal perceivers under standard conditions. It could have been blue: that is, such as to look blue to normal perceivers under standard conditions. This means that both the proponent of Grounds and the Bare Dispositions Theorist need to explain how it can be that dispositional properties are on occasion only contingently instantiated.

The second point we need to make is that it is central to the notion of a disposition that an object can have a disposition without manifesting it. Thus, there can be an object, *x*, which is not in circumstances *C*, and which has not verbed, but about which we might make the following claim:

(1) *x* is disposed to verb in *C*.

Obviously, neither the Bare Dispositions Theorist nor the proponent of Grounds is in the business of denying that a thing can have a disposition it doesn't manifest; to do that would be to change the subject. So it is not open to a friend of either view to deny that claims such as (1) are (sometimes) true. Rather, what the Bare Dispositions Theorist is saying is that, in the imagined situation, (1) is *barely* true. If (1) is true in the actual world, say, then there is no further fact about the actual world that makes it true. If someone were to ask "what about the actual world makes (1) true?", the only thing to say is that *x* is disposed to verb in *C*. For their part, what the friends of Grounds are saying is that *x* has some intrinsic non-dispositional property that makes it the case that *x* is disposed to verb in *C*. But of course, this by itself does not entail that *x* *does* verb in *C*.

The third claim we need to make concerns the semantic analysis of dispositional statements. That analysis we will assume, is supplied by a claim such as:³

(2) 'x is disposed to verb in C' is true at *w* iff *x* verbs in the closest C-world to *w*.

It is important to see that (2) does not on its own prejudice the debate between those who uphold the Bare Dispositions Theory and those who uphold Grounds. (2) does not by itself answer the question of what it is about the actual world that makes (1) true. (2) tells us under what condi-

How might the friends of the Bare Dispositions Theory reply to this charge? They might suggest that we get the wrong result only because we have considered a single time-slice of the three worlds. If we expand the description of the three worlds to include what is happening at other times, they might say that things look rather different. For consider:

@ x is not in C and x does not verb at t_1 , x is in C and x verbs at t_2 .

W1 x is in C and x verbs at t_1 , x is not in C and x does not verb at t_2 .

W2 x is in C and x does not verb at t_1 , x is not in C and x does not verb at t_2 .

Once we expand the description of the worlds to include information from more than one moment, the friend of the Bare Dispositions Theory might say that they evidently get the right result. For @ and W1 exhibit identical patterns of verbing and not verbing, relative to being and not being in circumstances C , whereas W2 exhibits a quite different pattern. The three worlds thus display just the right pattern of similarities for us to say, as we must, that x is contingently disposed to verb in C in @ and W1, but not in W2, or so they might say.

But though this sounds initially quite plausible, we do not think that it can be the last word that the Bare Dispositions Theory has to say on the matter. For we must ask what exactly the friends of the Bare Dispositions Theory mean when they tell us that they manage to reidentify x across times and worlds in @, W1 and W2. What features does x have—say, when it is not in C and is not verbing—that allows us to say that it exists at all? It seems to us that only two answers are possible, and that neither will help save the Bare Dispositions Theory. The only answers possible are either that x is a whole bundle of dispositional properties, instantiated at a time, and that it is this bundle that we reidentify when we reidentify x , or else that x is a whole bundle of non-dispositional properties, instantiated at a time, and that it is this bundle that we reidentify when we reidentify x .

Suppose the friends of the Bare Dispositions Theory say the former. Whether or not this answer is a good one—something we will consider at greater length in the subsequent sections—the crucial point for present

explains why *x* instantiates the disposition to verb in *C* in both @ and *W1*, and, as now described, it is the fact that this generalisation is false in *W2* that explains why *x* lacks the disposition to verb in *C* in *W2* despite the fact that it instantiates non-dispositional property *P*.⁵

The friends of the Bare Dispositions Theory might at this point insist that, as they see things, the laws of nature in @, *W1* and *W2* could be *exactly the same*. But in order for this to be so they must assume that it is not inconsistent with the laws of nature that hold in @, *W1* and *W2* that there exists another possible world which is exactly like the actual world, but which also contains an object exactly like *x* in *W2*: that is, an object exactly like *x* in non-dispositional terms, but which is not disposed to verb in *C*. In other words, they must assume that the following is a coherent description of a possible world in which the same laws of nature as those that obtain in @, *W1* and *W2* also hold.

W3 *x* has non-dispositional property *P*, *x* is not in *C* and *x* does not verb at *t*₁.

x has non-dispositional property *P*, *x* is in *C* and *x* verbs at *t*₂.

y has non-dispositional property *P*, *y* is in *C* and *y* does not verb at *t*₁.

y has non-dispositional property *P*, *y* is not in *C* and *y* does not verb at *t*₂.

But, as is perhaps already clear, there simply are no true generalisations in *W3* to constitute any laws of nature. In *W3*, as described, there are no properties objects possess which connect in a law-like way with verbing in *C*. Objects with non-dispositional property *P* in *C* may or may not verb. (This is, in essence, a schematic description of a possible world in which there are objects like the two wine glasses that Gareth Evans finds so puzzling. In our view, it should now come as no surprise that Evans finds the idea that there are two such objects so puzzling.)

The friends of the Bare Dispositions Theory must therefore be supposing that further properties are instantiated by *x* in @ and *W1*, and now in *W3* as well, and that it is *x*'s instantiation of these properties that explains why it verbs in *C* in these worlds, and that it is *x*'s lack of this property in *W2*, and *y*'s lack of this property in *W3*, that explains why neither *x* in *W2* nor *y* in *W3* are disposed to verb in *C*. They must be

Friends of the Bare Dispositions Theory might reply to this by questioning the assumption that similarity is an internal relation. In particular, they might suggest that, at least in the case of possible worlds, one can imagine a relation of bare similarity that holds between worlds but does not hold because of any internal features of those worlds. In support of this notion of bare similarity, they might cite the fact that similarity of possible worlds is often described in terms of how *close* one world is to another in logical space—indeed, we ourselves described it that way in (2). They might think that the spatial metaphor here is suggestive. Just as three different points of space-time—or three paintings, or wine glasses or whatever— p_1 , p_2 and p_3 , may be such that p_1 is closer to p_2 than it is to p_3 but not in virtue of anything about the intrinsic character of p_1 , p_2 or p_3 , so, they might say, @, W_1 and W_2 may be such that @ is closer in logical space to W_1 than it is to W_2 simply as such, not in virtue anything about the intrinsic character of these worlds.

But to make this suggestion is to be confused by language. Despite the fact that we use the same word, there is an important distinction between closeness in the modal sense and closeness in the spatial sense, and this distinction undermines the suggested line of reply to our argument. Closeness in the spatial sense is a paradigmatic *external* relation. After one has described the intrinsic features of space-time points—or paintings, or wine glasses, or whatever—one has yet to say what spatial relations they stand in to each other. As we have already noted, however, closeness in the modal sense is simply similarity, and similarity is an *internal* relation *par excellence*. Once one has described the intrinsic features of, say, three paintings, one has already said, even if not in so many words, which of the paintings is similar to which, and which of the paintings is different. Likewise, once one has described the intrinsic features of @, W_1 and W_2 one has already said, even if not in so many words, whether @ is more similar to W_1 than it is to W_2 . The problem with the idea of bare similarity, then, is that it wrongly treats similarity as an external relation when it is an internal relation. It thus seems to us that the friend of the Bare Dispositions Theory will not be able to give a convincing explanation of why W_1 is closer to @ than W_2 is by invoking the idea of bare similarity.⁶

It is important to see here that this is not the only problem that bare similarity poses for the friend of the Bare Dispositions Theory. Our

In short, then, commitment to the bare truth of (4) *just is* commitment to the idea of bare similarity. And, since it seems quite unavoidable that Bare Dispositions Theorists are committed to the bare truth of (4), it would seem that bare similarity is from their point of view unavoidable also. It is thus no accident that the Bare Dispositions Theorist should be forced to respond to our discussion of @, W1 and W2 by endorsing the notion of bare similarity: that notion has been present in the theory all along.

How strong a case have we made against the Bare Dispositions Theory? We certainly do not claim to have refuted anything. The friends of the Bare Dispositions Theory might continue to suppose that, notwithstanding what we say to the contrary, similarity simply *is* an external relation. We are ourselves not sure that *any* external relation between possible worlds that they succeed in characterizing should count as a relationship of *similarity*, but perhaps they could tough it out and insist that it simply *is* such a relation. What we do think, however, is that the considerations advanced so far should certainly suffice to answer the question we posed at the beginning of Section 2.

Remember we asked whether it is accurate to say, as Gareth Evans seems to suggest, that it is a mere “conceptual prejudice” that gets offended by the idea of a dispositional property that lacks a non-dispositional ground. The answer we have been led to is that it is no mere prejudice. If dispositional statements are true at all, it would seem that there must be relations of similarity that obtain between possible worlds. The friends of the Bare Dispositions Theory must therefore tell us what it is about possible worlds, as they conceive of possible worlds, that would enable this to be so. But what we have seen is that they have nothing whatsoever to say in this regard that is in the least plausible. We are thus rightly offended at the idea of a dispositional property without a non-dispositional ground because the idea makes no clear sense.

5. Neither a Bare Disposition nor a Non-Dispositional Property?

So far we have argued that Global Response-Dependence, when combined with Grounds, yields Noumenal Realism, and we have responded to a line of objection to this argument deriving from the Bare Dispositions Theory. Though the truth of the Bare Dispositions Theory would indeed entail that Grounds is false, we have argued that the Bare Dispositions Theory is not true.

disposition to combine and recombine in various complex ways at the molecular level. Isn't it reasonable to suppose that this pattern would simply repeat itself if we were to ask a scientist why the glass has those dispositions at the molecular level? Wouldn't science simply deliver up more dispositions? If so then it might well be thought that it is dispositional properties all the way down. For every dispositional property an object has it has yet another dispositional property which grounds that dispositional property, and so on *ad infinitum*. Though Weak Grounds is true, reflection on the way in which we in fact explain dispositions scientifically suggests that Grounds is false. Or so it might be thought.

This line of response to our argument might initially seem more attractive than the response based on the Bare Dispositions Theory. Those who accept Weak Grounds but reject Grounds can agree, as against the Bare Dispositions Theorist, that we always need to explain similarity between possible worlds on the basis of features that objects in those worlds possess. Similarity is never bare, they might say. After all, why is the glass disposed to emit middle C when struck? Because in nearby possible worlds in which the glass is struck—that is, possible worlds in which the glass has the same dispositions at the molecular level—it emits middle C, whereas in possible worlds that are further away in which the glass is struck—that is, possible worlds in which the glass has different dispositions at the molecular level—it does not emit middle C.

This certainly *sounds* more like what the defender of Grounds says, rather than what the Bare Dispositions Theorist said. However we remain unconvinced for two reasons. The first reason is that, in our view, though they don't come right out and say it, those who advance Weak Grounds but not Grounds are committed to the idea of bare similarity, and so to the idea that similarity is an external relation, just like those who accept the Bare Dispositions Theory. The second is that, even if we are wrong about this, the argument for Noumenal Realism we have given can be strengthened so that Global Response-Dependence entails Noumenal Realism even if we grant that Weak Grounds is true but Grounds is false. We will consider these in turn.

6. *Weak Grounds and the Objections to the Bare Dispositions Theory*

The plausible idea behind Weak Grounds is that we can, and sometimes do, cite the fact that *x* is disposed to verb* in C* in explaining why *x* is disposed to verb in C. The explanation science gives of why a

right, however, it seems plain that (1) will only tell us how things are in the actual world, and any other possible worlds that are relevant, have been independently characterized. After all, suppose you are trying to characterize your friend Bill's political views, and you tell me that he is slightly to the left of your friend Bob. Obviously, you will only have succeeded in telling me what Bill's views are if your friend Bob's views are independently characterized. If Bob's views have not been characterized at all, then you haven't succeeded in telling me what Bill's political views are. Similarly, if you say "x is disposed to verb in C" and the analysis of this sentence tells us that it is true if the actual world stands in a similarity relation to another possible world W, then you won't have succeeded in saying anything unless either the actual world or W has an independent characterization.

Proponents of Weak Grounds but not Grounds seek to give this independent characterisation by appealing to further dispositional properties possessed by x in both the actual world and W. However this isn't an independent characterisation of these possible worlds at all. For what makes it true that x possesses this further dispositional property in both these possible worlds? The answer is once again given by a claim like (2), which posits a similarity relation between these two possible worlds and a third. But, once again, we will have succeeded in saying something only if one or another of these worlds can be given an independent characterisation, and what proponents of Weak Grounds but not Grounds will be reduced to saying is that this independent characterisation is once again to be given in terms of yet further dispositional properties possessed by x in these worlds.

As should by now be clear, however, the proponent of Weak Grounds but not Grounds is *never* going to give us an independent characterisation of any possible world. But if we are not provided with an independent characterisation of any possible world, then it is hard to see how our original claim that x is disposed to verb in C, a claim which is meant to be true in the actual world, has any content at all. The proponent of Weak Grounds but not Grounds is like someone who tries to tell us what Bill's political views are by telling us that they are to the left of Bob's, and who then tries to characterise Bob's as being to the left of Ollie's, and who then tries to characterise Ollie's as being to the right of Al's, and so on and so forth. Just as this person will never succeed in telling us what anyone's

7. *The Argument Strengthened*

We have been considering the objection that, if the thought behind Grounds is interpreted weakly, then our argument that Global Response-Dependence entails Noumenal Realism can be avoided. So far, our response to this has been that to endorse the thought behind Grounds on its weakest interpretation—and so, as we have put it, to endorse Weak Grounds but not Grounds—is to endorse a view that is as implausible as the Bare Dispositions Theory.

But there is also a second response to the objection that might be given. Suppose what we have said is mistaken and that those who accept Weak Grounds but reject Grounds will not ultimately be forced to suppose that similarity is an external relation; suppose, in other words, that they can avoid our objection to the Bare Dispositions Theory. Even so, it is by no means clear how such a package of commitments could help someone committed to Global Response-Dependence avoid Noumenal Realism. The reason is that there is the following further premise that can be added to our original argument:

Completeness: In the fullness of time we will come up with a complete description of the world by applying our scientific methods.

Once Completeness is taken into account we claim that it is clear that someone committed to Global Response-Dependence is thereby committed to Noumenal Realism, even if they do only accept Weak Grounds but reject Grounds.

It is important to realise, right from the outset, that the argument that follows does not require the assumption that Completeness is true. What is important for us, and for the argument, is not the truth or falsehood of Completeness, but rather its epistemic status. This is because, on its most natural interpretation, Completeness purports to tell us an *a posteriori* truth about the future of science in the actual world. But this is something that defenders of Weak Grounds but not Grounds cannot accommodate; not, at any rate, without accepting Noumenal Realism.

express dispositions, and so, by Weak Grounds, these dispositions require explanatory grounds. But this contradicts our initial hypothesis. If there are explanatory grounds for the dispositions we ascribe to objects in giving a description of the world, then it would seem that we must be able to discover what those grounds are by doing some further science. The description of the world we came up with must therefore be incomplete. Contradiction.

How are we to resolve this contradiction? One possibility is to note an ambiguity in Completeness. On the one hand, Completeness might be read as saying that in the future, via the application of scientific method, we will come up with a description of everything in the world *that is describable*. On the other hand, Completeness might be read as saying that in the future, via the application of scientific method, we will come up with a description of everything in the world *at all*. The first way of understanding Completeness leaves it open that there are aspects of the world that elude description because they are not describable. The second closes this possibility.

On the second way of understanding it, Completeness does seem to entail a contradiction when conjoined with Global Response-Dependence and Weak Grounds. Someone committed to Global Response-Dependence and Weak Grounds must therefore reject Completeness, so understood. On the first way of understanding it, however, Completeness is not in contradiction with Global Response-Dependence and Weak Grounds. It simply entails that there are aspects of the world that we cannot describe because they are not describable. But if someone committed to Global Response-Dependence and Weak Grounds avoids the contradiction by embracing Completeness understood in this first way then they evidently thereby commit themselves to Noumenal Realism. For Noumenal Realism is simply the idea that there are aspects of the world that we cannot possibly describe or explain.

Is there any other way in which someone committed to Global Response-Dependence can avoid the contradiction? The only alternatives we can see would seem to involve either giving up Weak Grounds, or giving up Completeness altogether. To give up Weak Grounds is, however, to adopt the Bare Dispositions Theory, and, as we have seen, the Bare Dispositions Theory is simply implausible. This would therefore appear not to be an option. But nor could someone committed to Global

Grounds and Weak Grounds. But this is to adopt the Bare Dispositions Theory which, as we have argued, is simply implausible. Another response to the first argument is to reject Grounds in favour of Weak Grounds. But we have argued that Weak Grounds is as implausible as the Bare Dispositions Theory. Moreover, even if this succeeds in defeating the first line of argument, it leaves the second line of argument intact. Another response, this time specifically to the second line of argument, is to reject Completeness. But we have argued that this is to follow an objectionably *a priori* route to an *a posteriori* conclusion.

It therefore seems to us that there is no way for someone who embraces Global Response-Dependence to avoid commitment to Noumenal Realism. This is a surprising result, but we do not think that the Global Response-Dependence theorist should shy away from it simply on that account. They should rather insist that we all look again at the arguments they give for Global Response-Dependence. If, on reflection, they can convince us that these arguments are as compelling as they profess them to be then, so be it. We should all embrace Global Response-Dependence and Noumenal Realism. But if, on reflection, these arguments look less than compelling, then it seems to us that the Global Response-Dependence Theorist should give up, and the rest of us simply avoid, commitment to Global Response-Dependence.⁹

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NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion of Kant on *noumena* see Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

2. The argument we give here is a version of an argument with a long history in philosophy. The argument can be applied against any theorist who claims that the only features we know the world to have are dispositional features. Recent discussions of the argument can be found in Robinson 1982 and Blackburn 1990. In their discussions, the premise of the argument is that the concepts employed in physical theory only tell us about powers and dispositions of the world, and the conclusion drawn is that physical theory cannot tell us about the nature of the world in itself. The argument, as applied against the

is that there is no truth anywhere" (1990: p. 64). Blackburn answers his question by suggesting that there *is* something categorical that his argument has overlooked, *viz.* experience. "Categoricity in fact comes with the subjective view; there is nothing dispositional, to the subject, in the onset of a pain or a flash in the visual field" (p. 65). Someone might think that, armed with the categorical properties of experience, the defender of Global Response-Dependence could avoid our argument for Noumenal Realism. After all, far from being unknowable, our experience is something whose nature we can surely come to know by introspection. But the response has two defects. The first is that, barring a quite general phenomenalism, it is difficult to see how experiences, even if they are non-dispositional, could serve as the explanatory basis of dispositional claims quite generally: not *all* dispositions can have experiences as their categorical grounds. (Blackburn himself makes this point.) The second is that, if Global Response-Dependence is true, and if experience is non-dispositional, then one could not come to know about one's experience by introspection or by any other means. The reason is that, according to this view, the concept of experience would be a response *independent* concept; according to Global Response-Dependence, however, there are no such concepts.

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