


PHILIP PETIT
Terms, Things and Response-Dependence

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The questions I wish to discuss here bear on what response-dependence in this sense entails, in particular on what, if anything, it entails for issues of philosophical interest. I argue against two apparent lessons, one relating to how we apply response-dependent terms and concepts, the other relating to the nature of the properties and other entities to which they refer. While rejecting these apparent lessons, however, I defend a third: this concerns the reference-fixing significance of response-dependence as distinct from the application or reference of response-dependent terms. In arguing along these lines I remain broadly faithful to an approach that I have already presented elsewhere (Pettit 1991, 1993).
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1. The application of response-dependent terms: a negative conclusion

The claim here is that nothing counts as red in case it is not the sort of thing we know to be red. In the evidence, the primary inscriptions are of the sort of claims made in analysis of dispositions. In general, if the claim is true, then the property of redness is a disposition as it is understood in the present context. We can argue against the claim on several grounds. First, the evidence is based on the idea that redness is a disposition. However, the evidence is also based on the idea that redness is a disposition. The reason is that redness is a disposition as it is understood in the present context. We can argue against the claim on several grounds. First, the evidence is based on the idea that redness is a disposition. However, the evidence is also based on the idea that redness is a disposition. The reason is that redness is a disposition as it is understood in the present context. We can argue against the claim on several grounds. First, the evidence is based on the idea that redness is a disposition. However, the evidence is also based on the idea that redness is a disposition. The reason is that redness is a disposition as it is understood in the present context.
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looking red to such normal observers, and in such normal conditions, as materialise in the actual world. In that case the reality of dispositional redness—rigidified dispositional redness—presupposes that such observers and such conditions are available in the actual world, not just in some possible world.

Not only would the mental independence of dispositional redness be further compromised if that property is assumed to be rigidified; it is also worth noting that the independence would be compromised along a different dimension—and perhaps in a more significant way—in the event of a second sort of assumption. We characterised dispositional redness as that higher-order property of being such that the bearer would look red to normal observers in normal conditions and we added, parenthetically, that being such that it would look that way involves having suitable lower-order properties. But suppose it is assumed that this parenthetical addition is misleading. Suppose it is assumed that as between something that would look red in suitable circumstances and something that wouldn't there need be no difference in categorical lower-order properties. Suppose it is assumed, in other words, that dispositional redness is a bare or empty disposition with no categorical grounding. Such bare dispositional redness, whether rigidified or not, would be lacking mental independence along a very important dimension. It would be such that having the property comes to nothing more or less than normally seeming to have the property, whether normally seeming to have it in the actual world or in some possible world.

We have seen that redness would be dependent on our mental responses in the event of being identical with dispositional redness, and particularly in the event of being identical with rigidified or bare dispositional redness. But I want to show now that the truth of the a priori biconditional for redness—or, strictly, of the qualified version—does not entail that redness is dispositional redness. We can see how the a priori biconditional might remain true even in the event of redness being non-dispositional.

We can see how it would remain true, specifically, in the event of redness being identified not with the higher-order property of being such as to look red but with the suchness in question. Under the possibility I have in mind, redness is the lower-order property—no doubt, the lower-order disjunctive property—that makes things look red in suitable circumstances. If you prefer, it is the property that discharges the role that is characteristic of redness, making things look red in suitable circumstances. It is the realiser property, as we might say, not the role or dispositional property (Jackson and Pettit 1988).

If redness is the realiser property in this sense then it should be clear that it is not particularly dependent for its exemplification on our mental responses. If a certain molecular structure—perhaps we should say a certain disjunction of structures—realises the fragility role, making things break under appropriate pressures, that does not mean that it depends in any way for its exemplification on such breaking. And if a certain property realises the redness role, making things look red in suitable circumstances, that does not mean that it depends in any way for its exemplification on such breaking. The connection between the molecular structure and the breaking is contingent, not necessary; and similarly the connection between the realiser property for redness and the looking will be contingent too.

Is there any problem in continuing to defend the ethnocentric story, and in particular the qualified biconditional for redness if redness is the realiser property rather than the role or dispositional property? No, for pretty straightforward reasons. Even if redness is identified with a mentally independent, perfectly objective property, there remains a question, in David Lewis's phrasing, as to why this property and not some other gets to deserve the name of 'red.' Any story that sustains the a priori biconditional for redness, and in particular the ethnocentric story presented, can be seen as providing an answer to that question.

Why does a certain molecular structure deserve the name of 'fragile,' if indeed we identify fragility with the property that realises fragility, and not with the dispositional property itself? Obviously the answer is that it is that structure, and not any other, which leads things to break under certain circumstances. The linkage with breaking does not go to the heart of the property in question, as we have noticed; the property does not depend for its realisation on that relationship. But the linkage does go to the heart of explaining why the word 'fragile' is used with reference to the presence of that property and not any other.

1. If the reasons seem straightforward to me, that is probably because I have enjoyed the great benefit, over many years, of talking about these matters with Frank Jackson. His John Locke lectures are a source of illumination on relevant questions; see Jackson 1998.
Why does a certain realiser property deserve the name of 'red', if indeed we identify redness with the realiser property, and not with the dispositional one? By analogy, the answer must be that it is that property, and not any other, which lends things to look red under suitable circumstances. The lookage with looking red will not comprise the ontology of the property, making it depend for its exemplification on such looking. But under any plausible story it will explain why the word 'red' is used with reference to the presence of that property and not any other.

Why is it a priori, then, that if they can name the property, something is red if and only if it looks red to normal observers in normal conditions? Not because the property of redness is necessarily tied up with looking red in such circumstances. Rather, because the property in question—the lower-order realiser property as we are taking it to be—happens to be that property which causes things to look red to us under suitable circumstances. We are guided by how things look in determining what is red and what is not, this is borne out by the etotechnic story and by every plausible red. And so it is a priori—it is knowable from a knowledge of how we are guided—that a certain mind-independent property will count as redness if and only if it engenders appropriate looks.

3. Fixing the reference of response-dependent terms: a positive lesson

I argued in the last section that a response-dependent term like 'red' may refer to a perfectly mind-independent property: specifically, to the property that realises the redness role, rather than to the dispositional or role property. I argued, in particular, that consistently with having such a reference we can still understand why the term should be response-dependent: why it should be governed by an appropriate a priori biconditional. Consistently with 'red' referring to a mind-independent property, there will still be a question as to why that property gets to be identified as redness. And the answer to this question must be that given how we use the word 'red', it is a priori knowable that it will refer to a property that causes things to look red. I now want to generalise this line of argument, defending a positive position on the significance of response-dependence.

For all that I have said so far, it might be that as we vary our views on the ontology of redness we will find different reasons for why the term should be response-dependent: different reasons for why it should be a priori that something is red if and only if it looks red to normal observers in normal conditions. If redness is identified with a mind-independent property, the reason will relate to how that property gets to deserve the name of 'red'. If redness is identified with any mind-dependent property—say, with dispositional redness, whether or not it is rigidified or bare versions—other reasons will apply.

What I hope to point out, however, is that no matter how redness is construed ontologically, one single reason is going to be available to explain why the term 'red' is response-dependent. It remains the case under each available ontology that we have to explain why the property in question gets to deserve the name of 'red'. And under each ontology the most plausible explanation—say, the explanation implicit in the etotechnic story—will entail that something is red if and only if it looks red to normal observers in normal conditions. The mode in which the reference of 'red' is fixed explains the response-dependence of the term under all ontological theories of redness. It does not serve in that explanatory role just for the case where redness is taken as a mind-independent property.

No matter what terms or what things are in question, there is always an issue as to why this or that term—this or that term in our mouths—refers to this or that thing. The question bears on what it is about that thing which makes it the right referent for the term. It concerns, not the matter of what the referent is, but the way in which it is fixed that is entailed to be the referent.

Consider the term 'water'. Those of us schooled in the intuitions of direct reference will have little doubt about what it is that this term refers to, and refers to in all possible worlds as well as in the actual world: it rigidly refers to the natural kind that is chemically designated as H₂O. But even with a term like this there is a question as to how it is fixed that H₂O is the referent.

Suppose we inhabited and interpreted the word 'water' in a different actual world: in a world, let us say, where the stuff inhabitants drink and the stuff in which they wash, the stuff that occupies the seas and falls from the skies, is not H₂O but XYZ, a world, as we can put it, in which XYZ plays the watery role that H₂O plays in the familiar actual world. What would the word 'water' refer to in our mouths in such a world? Clearly XYZ. Clearly XYZ, because the referent of 'water' is determined in any world to any world that is given the place of the actual world—by appeal to the watery
that something is real if and only if a look to normal observers in normal conditions.

The term "object" refers to the same object as the term "real". This is because, in the context of the theory of reference, the term "real" is used to denote the existence of the object. For example, if someone says "The object is real", they are referring to the existence of the object in the same way that we refer to the existence of a physical object. This is in contrast to the term "conceptual", which refers to the mental representation of the object. For example, if someone says "The object is conceptual", they are referring to the mental representation of the object, rather than the existence of the object in the physical world.

In conclusion, we can say that the term "real" is used to denote the existence of the object, while the term "conceptual" is used to denote the mental representation of the object. This distinction is important because it allows us to make a clear distinction between the existence of the object and its mental representation.
that property which makes an impact on us in the first place, not the higher-order property that is defined by reference to it.

References


