

“Response-Dependence, Rigidification, and Objectivity”, *Erkenntnis* 44

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## 1. Introduction

A response-dependent account of a given attribute -- such as redness or wrongness -- identifies the attribute with the disposition to produce specified sorts of response in specified sorts of being under specified conditions. Schematically, response-dependent accounts often have roughly the following form:

$x$  is  $P$  =df For any being  $i$  of sort  $B$ , if  $x$  were presented under conditions  $C$  to  $i$ ,  $i$  would respond in manner  $R$ .<sup>1</sup>

For the moral case, this is often cast in roughly the following form:

$x$  is wrong =df For any being  $i$  of sort  $B$ , if under conditions  $C$   $i$  were to consider  $x$ ,  $i$  would disapprove of  $x$ .

A fully developed sophisticated response-dependent account would fill in specifications for  $B$  (the beings) and  $C$  (the conditions), would probably replace the reference to disapproval with a reference to a more complex

response, and might involve a more complex scheme.<sup>2</sup> For simplicity, however, I shall focus my argument on the above simple scheme of moral wrongness, since added complexities will be irrelevant to my argument.

Response-dependent accounts of moral (and other normative) attributes have received increased attention in recent years.<sup>3</sup> These accounts are highly attractive in that they appear to incorporate the plausible elements of each of subjectivism and objectivism without their corresponding implausible elements. Like subjectivism, response-dependent accounts ground normativity in the concerns and attitudes of mental beings -- and thus avoid postulating mysterious objectively prescriptive attributes. Like objectivism, plausible response-dependent accounts deny that normativity is grounded in the concerns and attitudes that we happen to have -- it is only certain sorts of response of certain sorts of mental being under certain sorts of condition that are relevant. Because we may not meet these conditions, our responses may well be in error -- both individually and collectively.

My purpose here is not to argue in favor of response-dependent accounts of moral attributes, but rather to argue that the ontological implications of such accounts have not been adequately understood. For there are several very different sorts of response-dependent account, and for some -- perhaps the most plausible accounts -- the response-dependence is merely semantic and not ontological. More specifically, response-dependent

accounts that rigidly fix (in a way that I shall make precise) the relevant responsive dispositions and conditions are, I shall argue, ontologically, simply a form of objectivism. At some level, this point has been recognized by a number of authors, but in general its significance, I shall suggest, has not been adequately appreciated.

## 2. Some Background

It should be noted that without some constraints on admissible beings, conditions, or responses, all attributes can be captured by a response-dependent account. Squareness (a paradigm primary quality), for example, is equivalent to being such that C-perfect squareness-detectors would perceive-as-square under conditions C (for some appropriate C) -- where C-perfect squareness-detectors are hypothetical beings that under conditions C perceive-as-square all and only square things. Squareness, that is, can be captured in terms of the responses of hypothetical sorts of responder. And if squareness is capturable by a response-dependent account, anything is. This shows that to be meaningful the response-dependence schema must be subject to some constraints on what sorts of being (or responses and conditions) may be specified. One useful constraint is that the beings must be actually existing beings -- or even more narrowly, that they be actually existing human beings. Squareness cannot be captured response-

dependently with such a constraint. Although I would defend the necessity of imposing some such constraint in order for the notion of response-dependence to be significant, nothing in this paper hangs on how this issue is resolved.

A second point to note is as follows. Response-dependent accounts appeal to how any being of sort B would respond. Thus, there may be some complexity in the explicated attribute, given the possibility of different responses from different beings of sort B. Response-dependent accounts do not necessarily assume that all Bs have exactly the same responsive dispositions. In the moral case, for example, some Bs may approve under the specified circumstances of a certain form of affirmative action, and others may disapprove. As a result, on a response-dependent account of wrongness and rightness, it may turn out that the given form of affirmative action may be neither permissible (since not all beings approve of it), nor impermissible (since not all disapprove of it). On such an account permissibility and impermissibility would be mutually exclusive categories, but not exhaustive categories. There would be a middle category of actions, etc. that are neither permissible nor impermissible. This admittedly is incompatible with our common-sense notions, but the common-sense notions may well be mistaken in this regard. Morality may not divide things quite so neatly into just the two categories of permissible and impermissible.

Of course, if there is too much disagreement among the beings, and the middle category is too large, then the response-dependent accounts are implausible. The point here is simply that a limited disagreement among the beings about some cases -- and so a limited middle category of assessment -- does not create major problems for response-dependent accounts.<sup>4</sup>

A final point to note is that, to be plausible, the responsive dispositions of mental beings specified by response-dependent accounts must be sensitive to certain attributes of the object (action) under scrutiny. Their reactions, that is, must be responses to the object -- and not just random reactions, or reactions merely to the surrounding environment. The disapproval of an action, for example, must be based on some attribute of the action (e.g., its pain-inducing consequences). For otherwise, the wrongness will not be based on attributes of the action.

The focus of this paper concerns the relation between the response-dependent account of the wrongness of actions, and the underlying attribute(s) of actions which gives rise to the reactions of disapproval.<sup>5</sup> Are the two attributes distinct or identical? For example, if the beings in question disapprove of actions under the specified conditions when, and only when, the action fails to be happiness maximizing, is wrongness identical with failure to maximize happiness?

We must be cautious here. For there are two radically different

forms that response-dependent accounts can take. The issue turns on whether the relevant responsive dispositions are rigidly fixed or not. After explaining the difference, I shall argue that non-rigid accounts make wrongness genuinely ontologically response-dependent, whereas rigid accounts do not. On rigid response-dependent accounts moral attributes are entirely objective and their satisfaction conditions have no essential connection with the responsive dispositions that are used to pick them out.

### 3. Non-Rigid Response-Dependent Accounts

Some response-dependent accounts of wrongness, I shall argue, do not make wrongness ontologically response-dependent. The key issue is whether, for a given claim of wrongness, the relevant responsive dispositions of the beings B and the conditions C are the same no matter what the time, world, and agent of the action being assessed are. If the relevant responsive dispositions and conditions are fixed and the same for all actions evaluated, then the account is rigid, and if not, then the account is non-rigid.

A well known sort of non-rigid account is one for which the wrongness of an action is determined by how the members of the agent's society would at the time and in the world of the action respond to it. Given that the specified responsive dispositions typically vary, at least somewhat, by society, time, and world, wrongness on this account genuinely tracks

responsive dispositions. The dispositions vary, and wrongness varies along with them.

Because this sort of account is action-indexed (the relevant dispositions are those of the members of the action's agent), non-idealizing (the dispositions of the members are taken as they are, and not in some cleaned-up form, such as eliminating any malevolence), let us call this sort of account an action-indexed, non-idealizing account. This sort of account, then, is non-rigid and genuinely ontologically response-dependent. It has, however, a feature that is problematic. Given that the dispositions are neither idealized (cleaned-up) nor rigidly fixed, it is possible that in some worlds or times (e.g., with different laws of nature, evolutionary mutations, or character-affecting atmospheric conditions) under conditions C beings of sort B approve of things which we find deeply morally repugnant. For example, if in a given world and time the specified beings approve of torture for fun, then, according to the above sort of non-rigid response-dependent account, doing so in that world at that time would be morally permissible. But this strikes us as crazy. Such beings, it seems, are morally depraved, and their responses are irrelevant. Torture for fun, we want to say, is just plain wrong.

Action-indexed, non-idealized accounts seem to yield mistaken moral judgements about actions in worlds or times in which the specified

beings are "morally depraved", but things are not quite that simple. For it depends on what sort of account of moral judgement is being considered. Internalist accounts reflect the perspective of the agent (his/her beliefs, values, etc.), whereas externalist accounts are based on the facts of the situation (and not necessarily the agent's perspective thereof).<sup>6</sup> There has been a long debate about whether moral judgements are internalist or externalist. In my view, much of this debate has been misguided in assuming that all moral judgements are internalist or all moral judgements are externalist. For, it seems to me, we can, do, and should, make moral judgements of both sorts. Sometimes we want to assess an agent's actions from his/her own perspective, and sometimes we want to assess them from a more objective perspective.

Although the above sort of non-rigid account is implausible as an account of externalist moral judgement (since it judges torture for fun morally permissible in depraved worlds), it is not clearly implausible as an account of internalist moral judgement (since internalist accounts by their very nature reflect the perspective of the agent). Furthermore, even as an externalist account, an action-indexed account can be made more plausible by partially idealizing the relevant responsive dispositions and conditions. That is, the problem of depraved reactions can be reduced by appealing to how the member's of the agent's society would respond if the conditions and



their responsive dispositions were suitably ideal (e.g., if they were fully informed, fully rational, and benevolent). And as long as the idealization is not full - that is, as long as the determination of the relevant dispositions and conditions depends at least in part on the actual dispositions or conditions - the account will still be non-rigid (since the relevant dispositions and conditions will vary at least somewhat) and thus genuinely response-dependent.

In sum, whatever their plausibility, non-idealized, and partially idealized, action-indexed accounts of moral wrongness are non-rigid accounts, and thus make moral wrongness genuinely ontologically response-dependent. As we shall now see, this is not the case for rigid response-dependent accounts.

#### 4. Rigid Response-Dependent Accounts

A rigid response-dependent account of wrongness, recall, is one for which there is a fixed (non-variable) set of responsive dispositions and conditions (including the laws and regularities governing those responsive dispositions) that is the basis for evaluating the wrongness of all actions.<sup>7</sup> Historically, the most well-known sort of rigid account is the ideal observer theory. According to (a simple form of) of this account, to say that an action is wrong is to say that it would be disapproved of when considered under

specified ideal conditions by specified ideal (e.g., fully rational and perfectly benevolent) beings.<sup>8</sup> Such an account is rigid, because neither the relevant conditions nor the relevant responsive dispositions vary with the action being assessed. All actions -- no matter who the agent, or what the time or world of performance -- are assessed on the basis of the rigidly specified ideal conditions and ideal responders.<sup>9</sup>

Another common sort of rigid account is the speaker-indexed, non-idealized account, according to which the truth of a claim of wrongness of a particular action, made by a particular person at a given time in a given world, is determined by how the members of the speaker's society would respond to that action at the time and in the world at which the claim is made. Such an account is rigid, because there is a fixed set of responsive dispositions that determine whether actions are wrong -- no matter what the agent, time, or world of the action is.<sup>10</sup>

I shall argue that, because there is no variability in the relevant dispositions and conditions, wrongness on rigid accounts does not track responsive dispositions in any interesting ontological sense.

On a rigid response-dependent account it is only the responsive dispositions of a fixed set of beings in some fixed specified world and time that determines whether a given action is wrong. The wrongness of actions is thus not (normally) determined by the responsive dispositions in the world

and time of the action, but rather by the responsive dispositions in some independently and rigidly specified world and time. As a result, the account can avoid, by the appropriate choice of beings, time and world, the above problem of "depraved reactions". For the mere fact the beings might in some worlds or at some times, approve of infliction of pain for fun is irrelevant on a rigid response-dependent account to the wrongness of the action. All that is relevant is whether in the rigidly specified world and time the beings would disapprove. Assuming that the specified beings in the specified world and time would disapprove of the infliction of pain for fun, we may conclude that, in worlds or times at which such beings would approve of such behavior, they are morally depraved.

Rigid response-dependent accounts avoid the problem of depraved reactions by making wrongness much more objective than non-rigid accounts. Indeed, they make wrongness so objective that in an important sense it ceases to be response-dependent. For wrongness so understood does not track the responsive dispositions of beings of type B. Rather it tracks only the responsive dispositions of beings of type B as they are manifested in the rigidly specified world and time under the rigidly specified conditions (which include the laws governing the dispositions).<sup>11</sup> And under those conditions the responsive dispositions just track some specific underlying attributes (e.g., failure to maximize happiness). Given the rigid

specification, this is not a contingent matter: wrongness, so understood, just is whatever evokes, under the rigidly specified conditions, the specified response from the rigidly fixed responsive dispositions of the beings at the rigidly specified time and world. Consequently, wrongness is identical with the evoking attributes.

An analogy may make this point clearer for the case of rigid speaker-indexed rigid response-dependent accounts. Consider the understanding of 'water' along the following quasi-Kripkean lines:

Water =df dthe stuff that has the chemical structure that the clear stuff that we drink and flows in rivers has [where "dthe" indicates a rigidification relative to the context of use].<sup>12</sup>

So understood, water (as we use the term) is stuff with a particular chemical structure (H<sub>2</sub>O), and has no necessary connection with what we drink and with what flows in rivers. In some worlds, or possible future times, what we drink and what flows in rivers is not water so understood. Facts about what, here and now, we drink and flows in rivers are simply used to pick out -- rigidly -- a specific chemical structure. In a similar manner in the moral case, speaker-indexed rigid dispositional accounts appeal to certain approbational dispositions to rigidly pick out a specific underlying attribute,

but the attribute picked out has no necessary connection with those approbational dispositions. In some worlds and times the specified beings may have different approbations dispositions, or be under different conditions, and so may not respond to the presence of the underlying attribute in the specified manner (e.g., with disapproval).

In short, rigid response-dependent accounts do not track the responsive dispositions of individuals. They track -- because they are identical with -- the underlying attribute that gives rise to the relevant responses in the rigidly specified world and time.

The above argument rests on three assumptions that should be made explicit. One assumption is that the specified responsive dispositions are dispositions to respond to certain underlying attributes of the actions. More strongly, it is assumed that for a specified responsive disposition, there are attributes of actions that are nomologically sufficient under the specified conditions to evoke the specified responses (approval, disapproval, etc.). Without this assumption response-dependent accounts would be implausible -- for the wrongness an action would not be determined by its attributes.

A second assumption is that the disjunction of the attributes of actions that are nomologically sufficient for the specified response is also an attribute of actions. This assumption ensures that there is a unique attribute (namely the disjunction of all sufficient attributes) that is nomologically

necessary and sufficient for evoking the specified response. Whether the disjunction of several attributes is itself an attribute (i.e., whether attributes are closed under disjunction) depends on exactly how attributehood is understood. Here I am understanding an attribute to be anything (1) that is capable of instantiation (realization, exemplification), and (2) for which identity is conceptually necessary coinstantiation. So understood, it is trivially true that the set of attributes is closed under disjunction.

Of course, if one understood attributehood in the logically sparser sense of universal (natural attribute) -- where not all things capable of instantiation are universals -- it is not obvious that attributehood is closed under disjunction. For example, one might hold that having a mass of exactly 2 kilograms and having a velocity of exactly 20 kilometers per hour are each natural attributes, but deny that their disjunction is -- on the grounds that the disjunction does not "carve nature at the joints".<sup>13</sup> Given this possibility, it may well be that there is no universal, or natural attribute, that is nomologically necessary and sufficient for the specified responses. But I am not claiming anything about universals, or natural attributes, in this logically sparse sense. I am only making the fairly trivial claim that attributes in the above logically abundant sense are closed under disjunction.

A third assumption of the above argument is that the identity of attributes is determined by necessary co-instantiation. This assumption

permits the inference from the necessary coinstantiation of wrongness and the response-evoking attribute to the identity of the two. Of course, the plausibility of this assumption depends again on how attributehood is understood. As indicated above, this assumption is part of my stipulated understanding of attributehood. And it clearly holds for that understanding.

Now, there are understandings of attributehood for which the assumption fails. In particular, if one understands attributes to be structured (have parts that fit together in specific ways), then necessary coinstantiation will not be sufficient (although it is necessary) for identity. The attribute of being green and heavy, on this understanding, would be distinct from that of being heavy and green. For although the two are necessarily coextensive, the former has greenness as its first part, whereas the latter has heaviness as its first part. Although the idea of structured attributes may seem a bit mysterious, perfect sense can be made of it by thinking of structured attributes as logical trees (certain sorts of ordered set) of non-structured attributes.<sup>14</sup> Appeal to structured attributes is clearly useful for the purposes of ascribing contents to mental attitudes (such as belief and desire) of finite beings to whom logical consequences (of a given attribute or proposition) are not transparent. The point here is that, because we are interested in attributes of actions independently of how they are conceptualized by mental beings, I am understanding attributes in the unstructured sense.<sup>15</sup>

Given the above understanding of attributehood, the existence of an attribute that is nomologically necessary and sufficient for evoking the specified response, and its identity with the rigid response-dependent notion of wrongness, is guaranteed. Although there are understandings of attributehood for which such existence or identity may not hold, the above understanding of attributehood is a fairly standard understanding, and one that is relevant to the issue of response-dependence. Consequently, in at least one important sense the explicated attribute (e.g., wrongness) and the underlying attribute base are indeed identical.

## 5. Conclusion

Historically, response-dependent accounts of moral notions were developed as attempts to ground moral normativity in the concerns and attitudes of mental beings—and thereby to avoid postulating mysterious objectively prescriptive attributes. The original accounts were non-rigid, and thus genuinely response-dependent and non-objective. In response to the problem of depraved reactions (e.g., where due to atmospheric changes we approve of torture), however, rigid dispositional accounts have been developed. Wrongness on these accounts is identical with whatever attributes evoke the specified response in the rigidly specified world.

The core point has been that rigid response-dependent accounts are



not genuinely ontologically response-dependent. They are rather forms of objectivism. They do not track in any interesting sense the responses of the specified beings. Rigid response-dependent accounts merely appeal to responsive dispositions and conditions to rigidly identify certain non-response-dependent attributes as normative attributes.<sup>16</sup>

Although this point is implicitly recognized by many, there is still a tendency to view rigid response-dependent accounts as non-objectivist theories. For example, rigid response-dependent accounts of moral properties are thought to be non-objectivist in contrast with "Cornell realists" accounts.<sup>17</sup> If the above argument is correct, however, rigid response-dependent accounts may be simply picking out dispositionally the sort of objective moral attribute the realists believe in.

This does not mean that rigid response-dependent accounts have no advantages over other forms of objectivism. On the contrary, as semantic accounts they may offer clear accounts of what functional/responsive attributes we care about in moral discourse, and how we could discover what (objective) base attributes give rise to those responses. At the level of concepts (individuated by what any competent language user would know a priori) rigid response-dependent accounts may be enlightening explications. But the corresponding attributes (individuated by their instantiation conditions) are perfectly objective. In short, although rigid semantic

response-dependence accounts do not yield ontological response-dependence, they may do important work by supplying an account of why one particular non-response-dependent attribute is moral wrongness.<sup>18</sup>

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## Notes

1. For simplicity, I shall ignore Mark Johnston's important point that having a disposition to generate response R in Bs under conditions C is not equivalent to being such that if it were presented to a B under conditions C, then the B would respond with R. The difference will not be relevant for my argument. For more on this point, see p.232 of Johnston 1992.
2. To give but one example of a different scheme: x is wrong =df x violates the norms that under conditions C would generate response R by beings of sort B.
3. For general discussions of the response-dependent approach to moral semantics see the essays cited below, and, for example: McDowell 1985, Blackburn 1985, Goldman 1987, Wright 1988, Pettit 1991, Brower 1993, and the essays in the long awaited (!) Haldane & Wright 1993. Also useful are the more general discussions of response-dependence in Wright 1992, Johnston 1992, and Jackson & Pargetter 1987.
4. For an interesting discussion of indeterminacies for the objectivist/non-objectivist debate, see Shafer-Landau 1994.
5. Of course there may be several attributes of actions that give rise to disapproval: failure to maximize happiness, breaking of agreements, deception, infliction of pain, etc. Each may be sufficient for the disapproval response. In this case, references to "the" underlying attribute should be understood as references to the most general attribute that elicits the response (i.e., the disjunction of all the more specific features). This move is discussed below.
6. This issue is distinct, although closely related, the issue of whether an agent's moral judgement necessarily provides motivation (which also goes under the internalist/externalist title).
7. The following authors each invoke and defend rigid accounts: Smith 1987, Smith 1989, Johnston 1989, and Lewis 1989. To my

mind, they successfully answer the concerns voiced in the excellent Campbell & Pargetter 1986.

8. Here I'm waiving my concern that without restricting admissible responders to actual ones, every attribute will turn out to be response-dependent.

9. Idealized accounts -- partial or full -- may well be able to overcome the problem of depraved reactions. They face, however, a problem of their own. For idealization distances the specified responsive dispositions from those of the assessor. Assessors typically have responsive dispositions that are quite unlike the idealized dispositions: typical assessors are not, for example, perfectly rational or fully benevolent. As a result, it is not clear that the responses of idealized responders are relevant for our practical concerns of assessing behavior. This point is made very effectively in Sayre-McCord 1994.

10. Speaker-indexed, rigid accounts have a feature that some may find problematic. For on such accounts, moral attributes are indexical the way that terms such as "I", "here", and "now" are. They have, that is, a specific content only relative to a context of use. Just as there is no monadic attribute of I-ness or now-ness (but only a dyadic attribute between persons and contexts), there, on this account, is no monadic attribute of wrongness. Just as the proposition expressed by "I am here." is different when asserted by you than when asserted by me, so too the proposition expressed by "Abortion is wrong" may be different on a speaker-indexed account when asserted in different worlds or different times (since different approbational dispositions may be referenced). One way of avoiding this problem, which I shall not explore here, is to privilege a particular context of use -- e.g., the initial baptismal use à la Kripke -- and then invoke a historical account of reference that hooks later uses with the responsive dispositions of the beings referenced in the initial use.

11. On idealized accounts (unlike speaker-indexed accounts) the relevant responders may come from many different worlds, since there may be many worlds with ideal conditions and ideal responders. For simplicity, in the text I will write as if there is a unique

ideal world picked out.

12. This differs from Kripke's proposal in that it holds that the reference of "water" is rigidly fixed anew on each occasion of use (as the reference of "I" and "now" are) -- as opposed to there being a causal connection with one original baptismal reference-fixing. Below I will mention a response-dependent account that more closely parallels Kripke's account for "water". See Kripke 1971. For more on indexicals, rigidification, and contexts of use, see Kaplan 1970.

13. Something like this understanding of featurehood is implicit in particularist objections to universal moral principles, and to universal accounts of the attributes that give rise to dispositional responses. They may grant that there are ad hoc disjunctions of attributes that are appropriately equivalent, but they deny that these disjunctions have any "natural shape". See for example, Dancy 1993 (especially Ch. 9).

14. See, for example, Bealer 1982, and Lewis 1986, pp. 55-59.

15. It may seem inappropriate to abstract away from how attributes are conceptualized by mental beings, since we are concerned with their responses and those responses depend in part on how they conceptualize attributes. In reply, it is certainly correct that the response of any given being will depend on his/her cognitive set (e.g., background beliefs, inferential dispositions, etc.). If the specification of the beings and conditions are compatible with different beings having different cognitive sets, then there will be some indeterminacy in the notion of response-dependent account of wrongness. For actions with the very same unstructured attributes may evoke different responses from different beings. This does not, however, require the response-dependent account to invoke the structured notion of attributes. It merely requires the acknowledgement that there may be some indeterminacy in the notion of wrongness.



16. Although I have focussed only on response-dependent accounts for moral wrongness, the argument and conclusion are, I think, easily generalizable to functional accounts (of which response-dependent accounts are but one type) of anything. For the same reasoning supports the conclusion that non-rigid functional accounts genuinely track the specified functional role, whereas rigid functional accounts track the underlying basis that fills the functional role in the context of rigidification.

17. See, for example, Sturgeon 1984, Railton 1986, Boyd 1988, and Brink 1989. See also Lewis 1989, where he describes his rigid account as subjectivist.

18. I thank Chuck Cross, Jonathan Dancy, Chris Gauker, John Heil, Brad Hooker, Eugene Mills, Geoff Sayre-McCord, and the audience Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University for helpful comments.