

# Rigid vs. Flexible Response-Dependent Properties

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There is a longstanding attempt to make dispositional theories of value and of colour run in parallel. But the analogy is none too good, and I doubt that it improves our understanding either of colour or of value.

David Lewis (1989)

According to a more or less traditional view of secondary qualities, they are – or would be – real though not fully objective features of external objects. Roughly speaking, they are *real* not only by being the significations of natural simple predicates which can be used to make predications that are, for the most part, truth-evaluable and sometimes true, but also by being exemplified independently of those representations. Roughly speaking, they are *less than fully objective* in that it is essential for something having them that it bears a certain relation to subjective responses of ours, at least as we actually are.

Response-dependence was intended to generalize the notion of a secondary quality in that respect, by applying also to values in a way such that – at least a qualified form of – realism was vindicated. My view is that response-dependence, by itself, fails with respect to this project. There is, I agree, a general notion of a response-dependent property, corresponding more or less to that usually used in the literature, under which *both* secondary qualities and evaluative properties – but not *all* properties – fall. But the claim that a property is response-dependent in this general sense falls short of constituting a vindication of realism concerning the property in question. This is so because response-dependent properties, in this general sense, comprise both what I will call *rigid* response-dependent properties and *flexible* response-dependent properties. My main aim in this paper is to pre-

sent this distinction between response-dependent properties, and to claim that only response-dependence of the rigid variety supports realism.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In the first section I will provide a brief background by explaining Johnston's original characterization of a response-dependent *concept* and offering an argument, due to a number of philosophers, to the effect that it fails with respect to the original project and that a metaphysical notion is required if this is to be pursued. In the second section I will present a general notion of a response-dependent *property* that is not affected by the given consideration. As I said, however, this notion also ultimately fails with respect to the original project. In the third section I will present the distinction between rigid and flexible response-dependent properties. I will then illustrate respectively the notion of a rigid response-dependence property with the case of colours (section 4), and that of a flexible response-dependence property with the case of values (section 5). Although both cases will contain controversial elements, their mere defensibility should suffice, I hope, for supporting my claim about the exclusivity of the connection between *rigid* response-dependence and at least a qualified form of realism. I will close with some considerations regarding the many response-dependencies.

## 1. Response-Dependent Concepts

The phrase 'response-dependence' appeared in the literature for the first time in Mark Johnston's 'Dispositional Theories of Value' (1989). By analogy with secondary qualities, and colour in particular, some philosophers, including McDowell and Wiggins, had attempted to defend realism about value against those who claim that value is not a genuine feature. Here is the idea: Consider a view according to which (say) redness is the disposition to produce in (say) perceptually normal humans an experience as of red in normal viewing conditions. Now statements predicating redness would clearly be, vagueness aside, truth-evaluable, and some of them true. Furthermore, something could be red independently of actually eliciting the responses from the subjects (if, for instance, the conditions are not the normal viewing ones) and, to the extent that we consider the relevant

subjects, responses and conditions as they *actually* are, even independently of what the relevant subjects might be like or whether they exist at all. It seems that if values were analogous to colours, at least conceived as such, then certain anti-realist positions concerning the evaluative could be rejected. Something like this line of argument is what, according to Johnston, the ‘analogists’ pursue for defending realism about value. As he puts it, ‘the leading idea of the analogist has been to show that by the same standards of genuineness it would follow that colour is not a genuine feature of surfaces’ (Johnston 1989, 139).

There are obvious and less obvious disanalogies between colours and values, but these, according to Johnston, do not preclude there being a further analogy capable of doing the work in defending realism the analogists wanted it to:

The most plausible, if highly generalizing, way of taking the analogy is this: evaluational concepts, like secondary quality concepts as understood by the analogists, are ‘response-dependent’ concepts. (Johnston 1989, 144)

His original characterization of the notion of a response-dependent *concept* was:

If  $C$ , the concept associated with a predicate ‘is  $C$ ’, is a concept interdependent with or dependent upon concepts of certain subjects’ responses under certain conditions then something of the following form will hold *a priori*

$x$  is  $C$  iff In  $K$ ,  $S$ s are disposed to produce  $x$ -directed response  $R$

(or  $x$  is such as to produce  $R$  in  $S$ s under conditions  $K$ )

[W]hen for a given  $C$  we have substantial or non-trivializing specifications of  $K$ ,  $R$ , and the  $S$ s, and the resultant biconditional holds *a priori*, then we have a concept interdependent with or dependent upon a concept of subject’s reactions under specified conditions. Such will be a response-dependent concept. (Johnston 1989, 145–6)

Two features of the characterization are worth noting, which *prima facie* contrast with each other. The first is that the project for which

the notion of response-dependence is introduced is straightforwardly *metaphysical*: to provide a way of explicating the (possible) analogy between secondary qualities and values by means of which 'a realism about value' (Johnston 1989, 139) could be defended, and thus explicating the

qualified realism [which philosophers have urged about many areas of discourse], asserting both that the discourse in question serves up genuine candidates for truth and falsity, and that, nonetheless, the subject matter which makes statements true or false is not wholly independent of the cognitive or affective responses of the speakers in the discourse. (Johnston 1989, 144)

The second is that, all this notwithstanding, 'response-dependent' as used here by Johnston qualifies *concepts* for properties like secondary qualities and values, and not those very *properties* themselves. As will be apparent in a moment, I have been convinced by the argument presented below that this is more than a *prima facie* contrast, and thus that his original characterization of response-dependence should be modified if his original project for it is to be pursued. But before going on to this, let me rephrase the proposal slightly, in a way that will be useful for the discussion to come.

Let me say then that if  $F$  is a (predicative) concept, a *response-dependence-related* (or *rd*, for short) biconditional for  $F$  is a substantial biconditional of the form:

$x$  is  $F$  iff  $x$  has the disposition to produce in subjects  $S$  the mental response  $R$  under conditions  $C$

or the form

$x$  is  $F$  iff subjects  $S$  have the disposition to issue the  $x$ -directed mental response  $R$  under conditions  $C$

where 'is  $F$ ' is a predicate expressing  $F$ , and 'substantial' is there to avoid 'whatever-it-takes' specifications of either  $S$ ,  $R$  or  $C$ . No further restrictions on the relevant specifications are imposed. In particular the relevant subjects could be more or less the very same possessors of the concept, or a subset of them, or an idealized subset of them, or some other disjoint set; the relevant mental responses could be

cognitive (a certain belief or judgment), or experiential (the enjoyment of experiences instantiating a certain quale), or desiderative (valuing). And those specifications could contain rigidifying devices. This last element will be crucial for the distinction among response-dependent properties I am interested in.

Now,

**rd<sub>0</sub>** A (predicative) concept is response-dependent iff there is an rd biconditional for it which holds a priori.

Several philosophers<sup>1</sup> have provided compelling arguments which in my view show that this original characterization of response-dependent concepts by Johnston does not succeed with respect to his original, metaphysical, project – i.e. the project of appropriately generalizing the notion of a secondary quality.

The main element can be put straightforwardly: there are also rd biconditionals for concepts for – what we reasonably take to be – *primary* qualities which hold a priori. Or more generally, there are concepts that are response-dependent, in the sense of (rd<sub>0</sub>), independently of whether they signify primary, fully objective, properties. If that is so, then the notion of a response-dependent concept of (rd<sub>0</sub>), interesting as it could be for *other* reasons, fails with respect to the project for which it was introduced.<sup>2</sup>

Why is this? Take a predicate signifying – what we reasonably take to be – a primary quality, like ‘is cubic’. It arguably does so in virtue of being associated with some reference-fixing material that, it seems, would crucially involve the relevant mental responses of subjects like us in question. But then there will be rd biconditionals for the concept expressed by the predicate in question such that their left-hand-side expresses that reference-fixing material, along the lines of:

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<sup>1</sup> Including Brynjarsdóttir (2008), García-Carpintero (2007), Gundersen (2010), Haukioja (2000), Jackson and Pettit (2002 *inter alia*), and Wedgwood (1998).

<sup>2</sup> For alternative purposes that the original characterization, or a closely related one, might help pursuing see Jackson and Pettit 2002 and Haukioja 2000. Sveinsdóttir (2008) argues that a response-dependence account of a concept can yield metaphysical results, but only on a conception of properties on which they are ‘mere shadows’ of concepts.

$x$  is cubic iff  $x$  has the disposition to produce in perceptually normal humans an experience instantiating a cubic-qualia in normal viewing and tactile conditions.

But now, for reasons familiar since Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* (1980), the fact that the relevant material plays at least a reference-fixing role suffices for those biconditionals to hold *a priori*, analogously as 'the standard Paris meter is one meter' holds *a priori* (assuming that the length of the standard Paris meter plays a reference-fixing role with respect to 'meter'). But then, although 'is cubic' signifies – what we reasonably take to be – a primary quality, it expresses a concept that *is* response-dependent, in the sense of (rd<sub>0</sub>).

Another way of putting the point is as follows. *Red* clearly seems a response-dependent concept in the sense of (rd<sub>0</sub>). Suppose that it is because the following holds *a priori*:

$x$  is red iff  $x$  has the disposition to produce in perceptually normal humans an experience instantiating a red-qualia in normal viewing conditions.

Will the acknowledging of this suffice for rejecting the so-called primary view on colours, according to which red is a primary, fully objective, property? It doesn't seem so. On the contrary, defenders of the primary view may be quite willing to accept that something like this holds *a priori*. And the reason could be put as before: even if 'red' signifies a primary quality, it arguably does so in virtue of being associated with some reference-fixing material that involves the relevant mental responses of subjects like us in question. That being so, there will be rd biconditionals for *red* expressing that material and thus holding *a priori*. Given this, then, we can conclude that (rd<sub>0</sub>) should be modified at least insofar as the original project for which response-dependence was introduced is pursued.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Wasn't it apparent to Johnston himself? I think it was. Just after his original characterization of the notion, he adds in a footnote: 'At least this holds with one proviso having to do with concepts introduced by reference-fixing descriptions. [...] Everyday terms for shapes might provide some examples' (Johnston 1989, 146n8). (And in all his subsequent contributions to the debate, he explicitly characterizes response-dependence by means of *identities*, among concepts or properties, and no longer in terms of the apriority of

## 2. Response-Dependent Properties

I said at the beginning that according to a more or less traditional view, secondary qualities are – or would be – not fully objective features of external objects in that it is essential for something having them that it bears a certain relation to responses of ours, at least as we actually are. It seems as if, for response-dependence to pursue the aim of appropriately generalizing that notion, it should better distinguish between different sorts of properties themselves, rather than between different sorts of concepts *of* properties, and hence require the relevant rd biconditionals to have certain *metaphysical* status, capturing the ‘essentialist’ component alluded to.

One first thought in that direction will *not* do.

A property *P* is response-dependent iff there is an rd biconditional for a concept signifying it which holds *necessarily*.

The reason is parallel to that just considered above, in that the proposal would fail by covering primary qualities as well. Let ‘is *F*’ be a predicate signifying a primary, fully objective property which expresses a response-dependent concept in the former sense of (rd<sub>0</sub>). Then take any particular true response-dependence-giving biconditional for them, and add to the specifications of the subjects, the responses and the conditions the rigidification device ‘as they actually are’ as to have something with the form:

*x* is *F* iff *x* is disposed to produce in subjects *S* as they actually are the responses *R* as they actually are in conditions *C* as they actually are.

Due to the semantics of ‘actually’, this biconditional will be *necessarily* true, and hence the property in question, primary by assumption, would count as response-dependent.<sup>4</sup> The failure to capture those

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the relevant biconditionals.) But of course, the proviso would make (rd<sub>0</sub>) useless, at least with respect to the original project.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this was my reason for not including, when characterizing (rd<sub>0</sub>) the requirement that the relevant rd biconditionals should hold not only a priori but *necessarily* (a requirement which, although absent in Johnston’s (1989) characterization, is commonly added). That requirement, when rigidified specifications are allowed, is not a further requirement: whenever there

particular essentialist claims alluded to in terms of the modal notion of necessity is nothing but a special case of the general failure to capture essentialist claims in terms of necessity, a general failure which was diagnosed by Fine (1994), see García-Carpintero 2007 and Wedgwood 1998.

The main idea behind Fine's view is delicate and subtle. But, for my present purposes, it can be sufficiently illustrated (I hope) with the help of the following examples. It is a necessary property of Socrates that he belongs to the set whose sole member is Socrates. That is a property which is impossible for Socrates to fail to have. But this property hardly is, it seems, an essential property of his: there seems to be nothing in the essence or the nature of Socrates which involves his belonging to any set whatsoever. As Fine puts it, '[s]trange as the literature on personal identity may be, it has never been suggested that in order to understand the nature of a person one must know which sets he belongs to' (Fine 1994, 5). Another example could help. It is a necessary property of Plato that he is not identical to Aristotle. That is again a property which is impossible for Plato not to have. But again it hardly seems to be an essential property of Plato. Otherwise Aristotle (and, for that matter, any object not identical with Plato) would be involved in explicating the nature of Plato.

The moral drawn by Fine from these and related considerations is this: *essence* is a more fine-grained notion than *necessity*, in that it is sensitive to the 'source' of the latter, as it were. Even if it is necessarily the case that Socrates belongs to his singleton, this is not something that holds in virtue of the nature of Socrates (but arguably in virtue of the nature of the singleton). And again, even if it is necessarily the case that Plato is not identical to Aristotle, this is not something that holds in virtue of the nature of Plato (but arguably in virtue of *both* the nature of Plato and the nature of Aristotle).

Coming back to response-dependence: the proposal is then that in the case of response-dependent properties, the necessity of the rele-

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is a relevant a priori rd biconditional there is also a necessary and a priori (suitably rigidified) rd biconditional. Conversely, when rigidified specifications are allowed, nothing changes if an existing necessity requirement is removed, *pace* Haukioja 2001.



vant rd biconditional has its source in the very nature of the property in question, whereas nothing like this is true of the (also necessary) rd biconditionals corresponding to primary, fully objective, properties.

**rd** A property *P* is response-dependent iff there is an rd biconditional for a concept signifying it which holds in virtue of the nature of *P*.

As I said above, I think this is indeed a general notion of a response-dependent property under which plausibly *both* secondary qualities and evaluative properties – but not *all* properties – fall. But this notion also fails with respect to the original project, in that the claim that a property is response-dependent in this general sense falls short of constituting a vindication of realism concerning the property in question. The reason is, as I advanced, that response-dependent properties, in this general sense, comprise both what I will call *rigid* response-dependent properties and *flexible* response-dependent properties.

### 3. Rigid vs. Flexible Response-Dependent Properties

Let me say that a specification of the subjects in an rd biconditional is rigid iff the relevant predicate involved in the specification is rigid.<sup>5</sup> So for instance ‘normal human perceivers as they actually are’ is rigid, whereas ‘those disposed to value as I am, however I was’ is flexible.

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<sup>5</sup> I am assuming, with Kripke (1980), and a lot of people in discussions in the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of science and metaethics, that the notion of rigidity might be extended to be applicable to predicates, roughly along the lines of: a predicate is rigid iff it signifies the same property in all relevant worlds. On that (controversial, although I think plausible and defensible) view, simple predicates like ‘is red,’ ‘is funny,’ ‘is good’ and the like are (arguably) rigid. Given this I will speak of them as *signifying properties*, without relativizing such talk to worlds. Lebar (2005) contends that a response-dependent property need not be rigidly signified but, if I understand it right, the considerations are in effect compatible with there being (flexible) properties rigidly signified by the relevant predicates. As to his other alleged ‘dogmas’ of response-dependence – that the relevant biconditionals be necessary and *a priori* – see my discussion in footnotes 4 and 10.

Let me say that an rd biconditional is *rigid* iff it involves a rigid specification of the subjects, and that it is *flexible* otherwise. So for instance

$x$  is red iff  $x$  has the disposition to produce in perceptually normal humans as they actually are an experience as of red in normal viewing conditions as they actually are

is rigid, whereas

$x$  is good iff those like me are disposed to value  $x$  in appropriate reflective conditions,

is flexible.

Now, and this is the distinction, given a response-dependent property, it is a *rigid* response-dependent property iff the rd biconditionals for concepts signifying it that hold in virtue of its nature are rigid; and it is a *flexible* otherwise, that is, iff there is an rd biconditional for a concept signifying it, holding in virtue of its nature, which is flexible.<sup>6</sup>

*Rigid* response-dependent properties (and secondary qualities in particular) are thus *dispositions* to produce in certain (rigidly specified) subjects certain responses under certain (rigidly specified) conditions. By contrast, *flexible* response-dependent properties are *flexible* properties, which are had, in each possible world  $w$ , by those things which have in  $w$  the dispositions to produce in the subjects, as specified with

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<sup>6</sup> Notice that, given that an rd biconditional obviously cannot be both rigid and flexible, no response-dependent property would count both as a rigid and as a flexible response-dependent property. So, the distinction is exclusive. Moreover, the distinction is also *exhaustive* but, it could seem, only due to the seemingly *ad hoc* fact of having focused only on the rigidity of the specification of *the relevant subjects*. For consider what we could call *mixed* rd biconditionals: rd biconditionals which involve a rigid specification of the subjects but a flexible specification of the conditions. Those would count, according to the definition above, as *rigid* rd biconditionals, which is rather odd. Having acknowledged this, I will ignore it for the rest of this paper. The reason is that to the best of my knowledge no one has ever proposed any account of the response-dependence of any item based upon mixed rd biconditionals of this kind. Furthermore, there seems to be no reason why one should dispense such an asymmetrical treatment of the subjects vs. the conditions.

respect to *m*, the relevant response under certain conditions, as specified with respect to *m*.<sup>7</sup>

Admittedly, the possibility of drawing some distinction along these lines is not terribly original, as allusions to the possibility of rigidifying devices figuring in the relevant biconditionals are customarily made. This notwithstanding, I take it that the common opinion is that the distinction, even if it can be drawn, lacks real significant import, at least insofar as the issue of realism is concerned. A paradigmatic example of someone who holds this opinion is Pettit:

[The relevant biconditionals can be interpreted] in rigid or non-rigid mode. Rigid mode: something is red at a world if and only if *in the actual world* it looks or would look red to the relevant observers. Non-rigid mode: something is red at a world if and only if *at that world* it looks red to the relevant observers [...]. [T]he difference generated by the rigid and non-rigid readings may not be very intimately connected with the realist problematic. (Pettit 1991, 612–3)<sup>8</sup>

The main point of this paper is indeed to vindicate the significance of the distinction precisely *vis-à-vis* the issue of whether response-dependence succeeds in sustaining realism.

As a first step in this direction, notice that the question of what kind of consideration could lead one to defend that a given response-dependent property is of the rigid or the flexible variety turns out to

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<sup>7</sup> Could one alternatively characterize the distinction directly in terms of the notion of a disposition? As García-Carpintero (manuscript) emphasizes, the issue of distinguishing dispositional from categorical properties parallels exactly that of distinguishing secondary from primary qualities, and familiar proposals, dwelling upon the apriority and/or necessity of the suitable connecting biconditionals, fail for structurally the same reason we have already considered: they over-generalize by covering categorical properties as well.

<sup>8</sup> A notable exception is Valentyn. He says, however: ‘On rigid response-dependent accounts [the attributes in question] are entirely objective and their satisfaction conditions have no essential connection with the responsive dispositions that are used to pick them out’ (Valentyn 1996, 103). But he is explicitly operating with a notion of properties or attributes with *modal* individuating conditions, and thus incapable of distinguishing between fully objective properties and, precisely, rigid response-dependent properties.

be far more complex than it appears. As it stands, a complete response would involve highly heterogeneous kinds of considerations. Let me, somewhat stipulatively at this stage, call *both* primary, fully objective, properties *and rigid* response-dependent properties '*realist properties*'. The issue as to whether or not a given *realist* property in this sense is a rigid response-dependent property (and in particular the issue as to whether colours are secondary qualities) is not something to be settled only on *a priori* grounds. Suppose that F-ness is a realist property. Now, for considerations related to those alluded to above, there will be a rigid rd biconditional for it holding *a priori* and necessarily. That will be so independently of whether the property in question is response-dependent (of the rigid variety) or a primary, fully objective, property. Now, the issue as to whether it *is* a response-dependent property (of the rigid variety) will depend on whether or not it holds in virtue of the nature of F-ness. But even if there could be (and in all probability there are) essentialist claims like those alluded to, i.e., statements which hold in virtue of the nature of a given entity, which are knowable *a priori*, this doesn't entail by itself that the statement concerning its essentialist status is itself something knowable *a priori*. And, as we have seen, the latter would be required for a view according to which one could settle on *a priori* grounds the issue as to whether one realist property is a rigid response-dependent property.

I want to suggest that what *can* be settled on *a priori* grounds is whether a given property is a realist property, in the present sense, or a response-dependent property of the flexible variety. Or rather, and more precisely, whether a given everyday ordinary predicate or concept signifies a property of one or the other sort.

Suppose that *S* and *C* are relevant flexible specifications of subjects and conditions, and *S*<sub>@</sub> and *C*<sub>@</sub> their relevant rigidifications. Suppose, for simplicity, that the following is the only pair of relevant rd biconditionals:

- (R) *x* is *F* iff *x* is disposed to produce in *S*<sub>@</sub> the response *R* under conditions *C*<sub>@</sub>.
- (F) *x* is *F* iff *x* is disposed to produce in *S* the response *R* under conditions *C*.

Given the stipulations, both of these biconditionals would be *actually* true (and *a priori* knowable, we may suppose), regardless of the nature of the property signified by 'is  $F$ '. But now the following asymmetry arises. For if 'is  $F$ ' signifies a realist property, (R) will be *necessarily* true but (F) will be just *contingently* so. If, on the other hand, 'is  $F$ ' signifies a (flexible) response-dependent property the reciprocal will be the case: (R) will be just contingently true but (F) will be necessarily true. That provides a way of testing whether or not 'is  $F$ ' signifies a realist property, and the test can be conducted on the basis of *a priori* considerations. The recipe is, very abstractly put, this: consider what would be a counterexample to the necessity of the relevant statement on the assumption that the predicate signifies one particular kind of property. Those I will refer to as *target situations*. Then check how these should be intuitively described (with respect to the relevant predicate) and conclude accordingly. Thus the issue as to whether or not a given predicate signifies a realist property depends upon what the proper description of the relevant target situations is. Let me consider this recipe in more detail, before going on to the specific illustrations.

If 'is  $F$ ' signifies a flexible response-dependent property then (F) will be necessary. Now take something actually falling under 'is  $F$ ', call it  $a$ . Consider the following target situation: a world  $w$  which resembles the actual world as much as possible, compatibly with the following: the subjects specified by  $S$  and the conditions specified by  $C$  with respect to  $w$  are such that  $a$  no longer has the disposition to produce in those subjects the response  $R$  under the conditions. The fact that this is a possibility is of course independent of the nature of the property signified by 'is  $F$ '. But the crucial question is now: How would we evaluate the statement ' $a$  is  $F$ ' with respect to this target situation  $w$ ? If we evaluate it as *true* with respect to  $w$  then, of course, (F) is false with respect to  $w$ , given that  $a$  is  $F$  in the target situation even though  $a$  is not disposed to produce  $R$  in the subjects  $S$  specifies with respect to it under the conditions  $C$  specifies with respect to it. But then (F) is only contingently true in the actual world, and hence 'is  $F$ ' does not signify a flexible response-dependent property but rather a realist property.

Conversely, if ‘is  $F$ ’ signifies a realist property then (R) will be necessary. Now consider something,  $b$ , which actually doesn’t fall under ‘is  $F$ ’ but is nonetheless disposed to produce  $R$  in the subjects under the conditions as  $S$  and  $C$  specify them with respect to the (counterfactual) target situation  $w$ , which, as before, concurs otherwise with the way the world actually is. The fact that this is a possibility is again of course independent of the nature of the property signified by ‘is  $F$ ’. But the crucial question is now: how would we evaluate the statement ‘ $b$  is  $F$ ’ with respect to this target situation  $w$ ? If we evaluate it as *true* with respect to  $w$  then, of course, (R) is false with respect to  $w$ , given that  $b$  is  $F$  in the target situation even though  $b$  is not disposed to produce  $R$  in the subjects  $S$  specifies with respect to the actual world under the conditions  $C$  specifies with respect to it (otherwise  $b$  would actually fall under ‘is  $F$ ’). But then (R) is only contingently true in the actual world, and hence ‘is  $F$ ’ does not signify a realist property but rather a flexible response-dependent property.

Let me stress once again that most of the facts that hold both in the actual world and in the target situation  $w$  do so independently of the nature of the property signified by ‘is  $F$ ’. In particular it is neutral on that score to suppose, as we have done, that  $a$  has, whereas  $b$  lacks, both in the actual world and in the relevant target situation, the disposition to produce in certain (rigidly specified) subjects certain responses under certain (rigidly specified) conditions; and that  $a$  lacks, whereas  $b$  has, both in the actual world and in the relevant target situation, the disposition to produce in certain subjects (as the specification specifies them with respect to the target situation) certain responses under the conditions (as the specification specifies them with respect to it). Acknowledging this is neutral in that it doesn’t by itself provide a way of settling the issue of the nature of the property signified by ‘is  $F$ ’. That is settled, I have suggested, by means of that which would be the proper description of those target situations in terms of ‘is  $F$ ’. But let us go on now to some illustrations of these considerations and thus of the distinction.

#### 4. Rigid Response-Dependent Properties: Colours

As I announced at the beginning, the case of colours and that of values to be considered in the next section, even if containing contro-

versal assumptions, should serve to illustrate both the distinction between realist and flexible response-dependent properties, and the kind of relevant considerations involving the proper description of (counterfactual) target situations we have been concerned with in the preceding section.

Concerning the colours, Wright says the following:

We are [...] obliged to pay attention to the following intuition about colour: that had the typical visual equipment of human beings been very different, or had the lighting (by day) on the earth typically been of a quite different character—perhaps resembling the illumination generated by sodium street lighting—that need have made no difference to the colours things actually are. The extensions of ‘red’ and ‘green’ would not have been different if all human beings had been colour blind, and would not change if they were to become so. (Wright 1992, 113)

Now I take it that Wright is here submitting what seems to be an instance of the relevant considerations to the effect that ‘is red’ does not signify a flexible response-dependent property.

For take for instance a certain rock which is actually a deep red, and call it *Mahá*. Consider the target situation, resembling the actual world as much as possible – and thus in particular *Mahá* is similarly disposed to produce the relevant response in certain (rigidly) specified subjects under (rigidly) specified conditions – in which the flexible relevant specification of the subjects specify, say, humans with perceptual apparatus which would make them count as colour blind in the actual world; or in which the flexible relevant specification of the conditions specifies, say, the illumination actually generated by sodium street lighting. So, *Mahá* does not have the disposition to produce the relevant response in the subjects as specified with respect to the target situation under the conditions as specified with respect to it.

The fact that this is a possibility is of course independent of the nature of the property signified by ‘is red’. But the crucial question is now: How would we evaluate the statement ‘*Mahá* is red’ with respect to this target situation? Wright’s intuitions, and I take it that most people’s intuitions would concur with them here, have it that it

should be evaluated as *true*. But if this is so then the relevant flexible rd biconditional for *red* will be false with respect to the target situation, and hence only contingently true in the actual world, and hence ‘is red’ will not signify a flexible response-dependent property but rather a realist property.

Many philosophers dealing with this issue, I believe, do agree with our intuitions concerning the applicability of ‘is red’ with respect to counterfactual worlds having such a consequence. Maybe even most—but not *all*. Consider for instance Averill:

[T]he human eye could change, in certain physically possible ways, so that after the change a few objects would appear to be different in colour to normal observers (i.e., observers who are normal after the change) [...] For the sake of definiteness, suppose that after the change lumps of the metal gold (pure gold) look red to normal observers under optimal viewing conditions. (Averill 1992, 552–3)

Now this certainly seems to be the (suitably uncommitted) description of a target situation to assess the issue concerning the nature of the signification of ‘is red’. And, as just alluded to, most people would say that our intuitions regarding this case are just those supporting the previous claim that ‘is red’ signifies a realist property. However, Averill says precisely the opposite:

Surely the identification of objects by their colour is so important to us that it would be preserved; so that after the change *we would say that gold is red*. ... [W]e ought to say (now in the actual world) that in the possible world imagined ... *gold is red*. (Averill 1992, 553–4)

As I said, my purpose here is illustrative, and not to defend the view of colours as realist properties.<sup>9</sup>

Suppose, then, that our relevant intuitions are such that colour terms and concepts signify realist properties. Now the notion of a *realist* property, as I am using it here, comprises both primary, fully objec-

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<sup>9</sup> Let me notice, however, that the view of colours as flexible properties is, I think, much more popular nowadays than it was when this material was first written, partly due to Cohen’s recent work, see, *inter alia*, Cohen 2009.



tive, properties, as well as secondary, rigid response-dependent, properties. One obvious question is: are colours of one or the other sort? As I said above, I want to claim that the answer to this question will crucially involve *a posteriori* considerations only accessible to the scientist. I think that most participants in the debate about the colours would agree in holding that it is not *a priori* true that colours are secondary qualities: as a matter of fact, our terms and concepts for colours are such that they don't reveal by themselves the secondariness, or rigid response-dependence, of the properties they signify, if any such exists. Although different people offer slightly different rationales for this, the core of them is, I take it, the point that has been already exploited above: our concepts for primary and secondary qualities are on a par, and thus, there is nothing in the *concept* of redness that entails that it signifies a secondary quality. Given the nature of the present perceptual case, this point can also be put thus: there is no relevant phenomenological difference between the way experience represents shapes and colours (assuming the latter are secondary properties), or again, there would be no relevant phenomenological difference in the way experience represents colours on the assumptions that they were primary or secondary qualities.<sup>10</sup>

## 5. Flexible Response-Dependent Properties: Values

Let me consider now the case of values. As we saw, the issue of whether a given predicate or concept signifies a realist property or rather a flexible response-dependent one is to be settled by assessing the modal status that intuitively should be attached to the appropriate flexible relevant rd biconditional for them, of the form

(F)  $x$  is  $F$  iff  $x$  is disposed to produce in  $S$  the response  $R$  under conditions  $C$ .

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<sup>10</sup> Notice that the *a posteriori* component I am presently concerned with concerns whether a given (*a priori*) true biconditionals holds in virtue of the nature of a property. Miscevic (1998) claims that the relevant rd biconditionals for *red* should not be required to be *a priori*, but if I understand his consideration right, his considerations actually supports the view that it need not be *a priori* that colours are secondary, compatibly with the *a priori* of the involved biconditionals, see for further discussion López de Sa forthcoming.

or its suitable rigidification, of the form

(R)  $x$  is  $F$  iff  $x$  is disposed to produce in  $S_{@}$  the response  $R$  under conditions  $C_{@}$ .

These, in turn, crucially involve intuitions about which would be the appropriate intuitive description, concerning them, of certain suitably uncommittedly described counterfactual target situations.

Consider the case of 'is funny'. Something along the lines of the following seems to be an *a priori* (flexible) truth:

$x$  is funny iff  $x$  is disposed to amuse those like me under appropriately attentive conditions.

Now take something funny, even something, I am ready and willing to grant, *really really* funny, like *The Simpsons*. Lang suggests that we would not take very seriously the suggestion that it 'would continue to be funny even if a comprehensive alteration in our comic sensibilities took place' (Lang 2001, 201). And it certainly seems to be so: consider the possible world in which such a comprehensive alteration in our comic sensibilities takes place, but which agrees, in so far as it is compatible with this, with the actual world, and in which in particular *The Simpsons* are exactly the same. Suppose further, for the sake of vividness, that the disposition of something to amuse us *as we actually are*, exhibited by *The Simpsons*, is somehow constituted by expectation of ours (say). Then, in our envisaged world, *The Simpsons* do exhibit this feature all the same; it is just that, unlike what we may suppose actually happens, doing so fails to make something disposed to amuse us once the alteration is in place. So far, this is the description of a relevant target situation, for it is uncommittedly described, in that it is not assumed that the relevant disposition to produce amusement in us as we actually are *is* being funny – nor is it assumed, of course, that they are *distinct* either. The fact that this is a possibility is independent of the nature of the property that 'is funny' signifies. But what does it signify? Well, consider the statement '*The Simpsons* are funny'. How are we to evaluate it with respect to this target situation? Lang's suggestion, with which, I take it, most of us will agree, is that it should turn out to be *false*. But then 'is funny' does not signify a realist property but rather a flexible response-dependent one.

At this point one could try to resist this conclusion by something like: 'We do say, at least sometimes, that *The Simpsons are funny*, in the objective mood, as it were, rather than that *I find them funny*. Furthermore, we say those things even acknowledging that they could not amuse some people, for after all some days, even if they're funny, they don't amuse us. Why couldn't we say then that *The Simpsons are really funny* even in the target situation, only that those unlucky people fail to be disposed to be amused by them?' I will say something more about the worry concerning relativism below. But the straight answer now is that we *could* definitely say so: it's only that intuitively we, or at least most of us, don't want to. Remember that the crucial issue is how a given target situation should be *intuitively described*. But as I have stressed, the situation should be characterized uncommittedly, so that in the appropriate sense, it *could* be described in the way incompatible with what seems to be intuitively required.

In the submitted consideration, there is also another important element which is worth stressing in order to avoid possible misunderstandings. The fact that we have simple predicates like 'is funny' signifying the property of being funny does arguably entail that there should be a real/appearance distinction concerning what is funny, that being funny should be distinct from seeming funny or actually amusing. But that of course is also the case *even if being funny is a flexible response-dependent property*, and hence in particular does not entail anything about what the proper intuitive description of target situations should be. There are things which seem funny although they are not fun at all,<sup>11</sup> and conversely, as submitted, *The Simpsons* are funny even if they sometimes fail to seem so. But that is indeed entailed by the use of the *dispositional* idiom in the rd biconditionals. Dispositions can be possessed without issuing their characteristic manifestations. And conversely, their manifestation could occur without being the manifestation of a possessed disposition. Flexible response-dependent properties are not dispositions, true enough. But with respect to each world, the things that have a given flexible response-dependent property in this world are those that are disposed to produce the relevant response in the subjects as they are in that world under the conditions as they are in that world. Hence, in each world,

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<sup>11</sup> See Wright 1992, 101, for a dozen examples of this.

having the property of being funny is not the same as issuing the relevant response, seeming funny.

This seems to hold for a number of similar evaluative predicates: 'is tasty', 'is disgusting', 'is comfortable', let alone 'is sexy', 'is fashionable', or 'is cool'. With respect to any of these, it seems, hardly anyone would claim to have the intuitions supporting their signifying realist properties. But if that is so, and realism concerning their significations is rejected, then we do have the required support for the claim that response-dependence fails to vindicate even a qualified realism concerning the properties in question, contrary to the purpose for which it was introduced. For those flexible response-dependent properties *are* response-dependent properties.

But thinking about these particular cases of what can be called *soft* evaluative predicates might make one wonder whether the situation will generalize to encompass *all* evaluative predicates. And indeed some initial plausibility could be given to the view even in the sketchy terms we have been dealing with so far. For consider the predicate 'is good' and suppose something like the following is the relevant flexible rd biconditional, see Lewis 1989:

$x$  is good iff we are disposed to value  $x$  in appropriate reflective conditions,

where *valuing* is the favourable attitude of desiring to desire, and 'we' refers to a population consisting of the speaker and those relevantly like her and to be *relevantly* like a given subject is to be disposed, with respect to valuing *the relevant thing in question* in the relevant conditions, *exactly* how the subject is. It is important to stress that, so understood, 'we' turns out to be a *flexible* characterization of a group of subjects. The predicate 'is relevantly like me' actually picks out the property of being relevantly the way I am *actually*. But I could be otherwise, and in particular my disposition to value could be very different from what it actually is. But then, with respect to those worlds in which I am suitably different, 'is relevantly like me' will signify the property of being relevantly the way I *would be* in those situations.

What are we going to say about its modal status? What is good surely is not what we happen to value: we easily fail to value some things which really are good and value some things which really are not.

That is certainly indisputable, but as I've stressed, beside the point. What is relevant is whether we can make sense of something being good *in* a situation in which we, as we are in that situation, are not *disposed* at all to value it, even under the appropriate reflective conditions. And that seems utterly odd, at least on first sight. But if we cannot make sense of this, then we have the materials for defending that being good (and arguably every evaluative property) is a *flexible* response-dependent property and not a realist property.

I am aware that a lot of people will nonetheless resist this quick and rough consideration, especially when they have in mind *hard* evaluative properties, like moral properties. As in the above case of colours, I do not want to defend the view further here.<sup>12</sup> Rather, I want to comment briefly on the connection between flexible response-dependence and relativism.

People mean a number of different things by 'relativism'. Here I am interested in a version of it that is arguably more general than some others, but not vacuous, inspired by Wright's notion of a discourse failing to exert *cognitive command*. Roughly, relativism holds, in this sense, if appearances of faultless disagreement in the domain in question are to be endorsed – it could indeed be the case that there are irremovable divergences in judgment without either party being thereby in error, see López de Sa 2010.

It is important to observe that relativism so characterized consists in there being *conceivable* irremovable divergences. That does not *entail* that those divergences actually occur. But it does not *preclude* it either. *Factual* relativism concerning a given predicate can be seen as the claim that the sort of irremovable divergences whose conceivability establishes relativism concerning it *actually occurs*.

Flexible response-dependence *does* entail relativism, so in particular, if values are flexible response-dependent properties, this vindicates relativism about values. The argument for the claim that if a predicate signifies a flexible response-dependent property then relativism concerning it follows, is indeed quite direct: any target situation whose proper intuitive description favours the flexible response-dependence

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<sup>12</sup> But see Lewis 1989, López de Sa 2003 and 2006, Railton 1998.

of its signification contains the materials for a suitably irremovable divergence.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to notice that, independently of the contention about the values, this entailment by itself makes the notion of *flexible* response-dependence illuminatingly connected with the problem of delineating the realism/antirealism debate, which in turn could vindicate my use of the label *realist* for the properties signified by simple natural predicates which aren't flexible response-dependent.

## 6. The Many Response-Dependencies

Response-dependence was introduced in order to generalize the notion of a secondary quality by applying also to values in a way such that – at least a qualified form of – realism was vindicated. The original characterization of a response-dependent concept fails with respect to this original project, as it arguably overgeneralizes, covering concepts independently of whether they signify primary, fully objective, properties. The amended general characterization of a response-dependent property does not suffer from this difficulty, as it covers

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<sup>13</sup> A relativism of this sort, it is often said, would contradict a basic platitude regarding conversations concerning the evaluative: ordinary participants are committed to regard utterances of 'that is good' and 'that is not good' as (literally) contradicting each other. Here is Wright: 'If it were right, there would be an analogy between disputes of inclinations and the 'dispute' between one who says 'I am tired' and her companion who replies, 'Well, I am not' (when what is at issue is one more museum visit). There are the materials here, perhaps, for a (further) disagreement but no disagreement has yet been expressed. But ordinary understanding already hears a disagreement between one who asserts that hurt-free infidelity is acceptable and one who asserts that it is not' (Wright 2001, 51). I agree with the *datum*: in any ordinary non-defective conversation it is common knowledge among the participants that utterances of (say) 'that is good' and 'that is not good' would contradict each other. But I resist the idea that a Lewisian proposal, with the relativism concerning the evaluative it entails, is incompatible with it. This resistance can be substantiated by making explicit a presuppositional component it has, along the lines of: 'is good' triggers the presupposition that the addressees are relevantly like the speaker both in actual and counterfactual situations. That element is anticipated by Lewis himself, see Lewis 1989, 84; see for elaboration López de Sa 2008.

*both* secondary qualities and evaluative properties, but not *all* properties – and thus constitute a *prima facie* candidate for the original project for which response-dependence was introduced. I have argued that it ultimately fails however, as the claim that a property is response-dependent in this general sense falls short of constituting a vindication of realism concerning the property in question. As I said, this is so because response-dependent properties, in this general sense, comprise both rigid response-dependent properties and flexible response-dependent properties. Flexible response-dependent properties very plausibly include soft evaluative properties like being tasty, disgusting, comfortable, sexy, fashionable or cool, and in any case entail the sort of relativism traditionally contrasted with realism. Yet flexible response-dependence properties are response-dependent properties.

To conclude I want to make explicit that the way all this is expressed depends on having decided to use ‘response-dependent property’ to express a notion that at least constitutes a *prima facie* candidate for the original project for which response-dependence was introduced. This contrasts with at least two possible alternatives, present in the literature.

García-Carpintero (2007) characterizes ‘response-dependent property’ stipulating that the specifications figuring in the relevant biconditionals are rigidified, that is, so that ‘response-dependent properties’ in his sense just are *rigid* response-dependent properties. ‘Response-dependence’ in his sense would indeed serve to support realism. But that values are ‘response-dependent properties’ in his sense would require the kind of a posteriori considerations illustrated with the case of the colours, and in any case would be at odds with what most think is plausible to hold with respect to being tasty, disgusting, comfortable, sexy, fashionable and cool.<sup>14</sup>

Johnston (1998) characterizes ‘response-dependent property’ stipulating that the necessity of the relevant biconditionals is not the result

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<sup>14</sup> If I understand him right, at the time that paper was written he seemed to hold that it was impossible for a predicate to signify (what I am calling) flexible response-dependence properties. He may have changed his mind since.

of the specifications figuring in them being rigidified, that is, so that ‘response-dependent properties’ in his sense just are *flexible* response-dependent properties. That values are ‘response-dependent properties’ in his sense would be certainly congenial with what most think is plausible to hold with respect to being tasty, disgusting, comfortable, sexy, fashionable and cool. But for that reason, and for the considerations involving relativism I alluded to, ‘response-dependence’ in his sense does not seem a *prima facie* candidate to serve to support realism.

Response-dependence as applied to properties, as I have been using the notion, does indeed constitute a *prima facie* candidate for the original project for which response-dependence was introduced. It also ultimately fails, though.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This paper elaborates on the core distinction of López de Sa 2003. Thanks to audiences at the Australian National University, Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea, Stockholms Universitet, Turun Yliopisto, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Universidad de Granada, Universitat de Barcelona, and University of St Andrews, and in particular to Agustín Arrieta, Eline Busck, Josep Corbí, Fabrice Correia, Martín Davies, Esa Díaz-León, José A. Díez, Andy Egan, Manuel García-Carpintero, José Gil, Andrea Iacona, Jussi Haukioja, Frank Jackson, Philipp Keller, Kevin Mulligan, Philip Pettit, Sven Rosenkranz, Armin Tatzel, Ekai Tzapartegi, Agustín Vicente, Crispin Wright, Elia Zardini, and the editors of this volume. Research has been partially funded by FFI2008-06153 and CSD2009-0056 (MICINN), 2009SGR-1077 (AGAUR), and ITN FP7-238128 (European Community).



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