

# Siding with Euthyphro: Response-Dependence and Conferred Properties

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*Abstract:* I argue that a response-dependence account of a concept can yield metaphysical results, and not merely epistemological or semantical results, which has been a prevalent view in the literature on response-dependence. In particular, I show how one can argue for a conferralist account of a certain property by arguing that the concept of the property is response-dependent, if certain assumptions are made.

## 1. Response-Dependence and Conferred Properties

Euthyphro is in the unfortunate situation of having to prosecute his own father, because he thinks that is the pious thing to do. Socrates, in his customary fashion, insists that Euthyphro give him an account of what it is for an action to be pious. When Euthyphro responds that to be pious is to be loved by the gods, Socrates asks him:<sup>1</sup>

Is what is pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?

Euthyphro's initial position seems to be that what is pious is so because it is loved by the gods, although he later succumbs to Socrates' powers of persuasion, and agrees with him that the gods love the pious because it is pious.

Let us consider Euthyphro's position before he succumbs to Socrates. On this view, being pious is dependent upon the attitudes of the Greek gods. It is in virtue of being loved by the gods that an action is pious. Not so on the Socratic view. On that view the action has a certain property, being pious, quite independently of the gods' attitudes. Indeed, it is as a result of detecting the *property* of being pious that the gods come to love the action.

The disagreement here is a metaphysical one and concerns the status of the property of being pious. Is the property, as Euthyphro contends, what I call a 'conferred property', i.e. does the gods' love *confer* the property on the action? Or is Socrates right and the action pious quite independently of the gods and their attitudes?

While I don't have a particular interest in the property of being pious, I do have an interest in conferred properties more generally and the question how one would go about showing that a certain property is conferred. How would one go about siding with Euthyphro on the question of being pious, for example?

In this paper I show how one can use a *response-dependence* account of a *concept*, an approach much discussed in the recent philosophical literature,<sup>2</sup> to offer a *conferral* account of a *property*. My doing so serves two main functions:

First, it shows how a response-dependence account of a concept can yield metaphysical results, as opposed to merely epistemological or semantical results. It is a persistent view in the literature, though seldom argued for,<sup>3</sup> that a response-dependence account of a concept only serves an epistemic or semantic function and yields no metaphysical conclusions about the property the concept is of. I argue that whether or not metaphysical upshot is to be had from a response-dependence account of a concept depends on one's prior assumptions about the epistemic access we have to properties through our concepts of them. I draw out what those assumptions must be, if one thinks that no metaphysical upshot is to be had. I then sketch an alternative conception of the relationship between concepts and properties which allows the move from an argument for the response-dependence of a concept to the conferred status of the property the concept is of. This alternative conception I call 'the traditional conception', because of its long history, and characterize it by the slogan *properties are shadows of concepts*.

Secondly, once I have located under what conditions one can offer a conferral account of a property by offering a response-dependence account of a concept, a strategy emerges for arguing that a certain property, be it the property of being pious or any other, is conferred. I discuss whether the traditional conception is too high a price to pay for someone interested in offering a conferralism about a certain property, and argue that not only is the traditional conception perfectly coherent and independently plausible, but might be particularly attractive to someone with anti-realist sentiments, which many would-be conferralists might be.

The argument proceeds as follows. First I discuss what a response-dependence account of a concept involves, and distinguish it from other response-dependence accounts. Then I show how the traditional conception licenses us to go from a response-dependence account of a concept to a conferral account of the property the concept is about. I then discuss worries about whether the traditional conception is coherent and plausible, whether adopting it is to beg the question of the status of the property in question, and whether the resulting conferralism of the property in question is really a view that captures Euthyphro's initial intuition. The picture that emerges is a model that I hope that anyone who wants to articulate a certain kind of anti-realism about properties would find interesting and useful. My final remarks concern the uses of such a response-dependence account of concepts for an anti-realist project.

## 2. Varieties of Response-Dependence

The notion of response-dependence has received considerable attention in recent philosophical literature although there is scarcely any consensus about what a response-dependence account of something involves. What we can say in general about such accounts is that in offering a response-dependence account of something

the idea is that subjective human responses are somehow implicated in determining that thing. What that 'thing' is and how human responses are implicated, however, differs considerably. In the most influential accounts, the thing in question has been a *term* or a *concept*. Thus some philosophers have offered a *semantic* account of the role of human responses in how the reference of our *terms* becomes fixed.<sup>4</sup> Such accounts highlight the role human responses play in determining what some pieces of language hook up to in the world. Others have taken a response-dependence account to serve an *epistemic* function by providing a non-reductive analysis or elucidation of our *concepts*.<sup>5</sup> Such accounts elucidate to us how human responses are implicated in the content of our concept of something. Still others hope to offer response-dependence accounts of properties directly to show that certain properties are dependent in some way on human responses.<sup>6</sup>

My aim in this paper is to show how arguing that a certain concept is response-dependent can be an argument for the claim that the property the concept is of is conferred. There are reasons why I have chosen to focus on a response-dependence account of concepts and how to reach metaphysical conclusions from them, and not focus on response-dependence accounts of terms (semantic accounts) or of properties directly (ontological accounts):

I think that offering a semantic response-dependence account of a term is not likely to yield any conclusions about the status of the property the term refers to.<sup>7</sup> To see this, consider, e.g., the predicate 'is pious' and the thesis that the gods' attitudes are implicated in fixing what property the predicate stands for. Does that entail that the property in question is conferred? No, it does not. The response-dependence of the predicate 'is pious' is entirely compatible with the Socratic view that being pious is not a conferred property. The response-dependence of the predicate ensures that the gods' attitudes determine that 'is pious' stands for *being pious*, rather than *being schmiious* or *being schliious*. But that is compatible with the Socratic story where an action has the property of being pious or schmiious or schliious quite independently of the gods and their attitudes. It should, thus, be clear that a semantic account, where our attitudes or responses are implicated in the fixing of the reference of certain terms yields no conclusions about the status of that which is referred to. So, in particular, offering a response-dependence account of our predicates is not going to yield that the properties these predicates stand for are *conferred*.

What about a response-dependence account of the concept of being pious, where the concept is understood as a cluster of beliefs<sup>8</sup> about the property of being pious? Does such a response-dependence account of a concept yield that the property it is about is conferred? One might think that it does not. For one might think that an account of our concepts is merely an account of how we think of some aspect of the world, and not an account of what that aspect of the world is like. And if so, isn't it clear that a response-dependence account of the concept of being pious can yield no conclusions about the property of being pious, but only about how we think of that property? Doesn't it seem that no metaphysical upshot can be had from a response-dependence account of our concepts?

Not so. As I will show, the above argument rests crucially on an assumption about the relation between concepts and the properties they are about. If one

rejects that assumption, a response-dependence account of a concept yields a conferral account of the property the concept is about. Metaphysical upshot is indeed to be had from a response-dependence account of our concepts.

From considering the concerns one may have about the metaphysical conclusions that can be drawn from a response-dependence account of concepts, it should be clear that if one offers a response-dependence account of a property directly (i.e. gives an ontological response-dependence account), one bypasses altogether the question what our epistemic access is to the properties—through our concepts or some other way. I don't want to take a stand on the issue whether the various ontological response-dependence theorists are licensed to bypass that issue. In this paper, however, I want to put the question of our epistemic access to properties through our concepts front and centre. Hence, the focus of this paper is how to derive metaphysical conclusions from a response-dependence account of a concept.

### 3. A Response-Dependence Account of Concepts

A concept *F* is a response-dependent concept just in case the following holds:<sup>9</sup>

The concept *F* = the concept of inducing response *R* in subjects *S* under conditions *C*.

Special attention must be paid to giving a substantial characterization of *R*, *S*, and *C*, lest we trivialize the account. To illustrate this last point consider the example of the concept red:

The concept red = the concept of being disposed to look red to ideal observers under ideal conditions.

If we don't give a substantial specification of *ideal observers* and *ideal conditions*, then we open ourselves up to the trivial reading of those notions, namely, where an observer and conditions are ideal just in case something looks red to the observers in those conditions when it *is in fact red*. The concept of being disposed to look red when it is in fact red is not a response-dependent concept in the sense intended.<sup>10</sup>

It will be important for my argument that the concepts we are concerned with are concepts of properties, such as being red or being furious, and not concepts of objects, such as Aristotle, or concepts of stuffs, such as water. To avoid confusion, I will talk about the concept of being red (or the concept red), not the concept of redness.<sup>11</sup>

To offer a response-dependence account of some concept is really to argue that the concept is identical to a concept that carries its response-dependence status on its sleeve. For instance, to offer a response-dependence account of the concept of being red one proceeds by arguing that the concept is really identical to the concept of inducing response *R* in subjects *S* under conditions *C*, for some *R*, *S*, and *C*. The challenge is then to specify *R*, *S*, and *C* to make the claim plausible that these concepts are really identical.

As I see it, a response-dependence account of a concept is a latter day conceptual analysis. The aim is to show how concepts of properties that on the face of it do not involve the responses or attitudes of subjects are in fact identical to concepts that carry their response-dependence on their sleeves. What are the criteria of identity of concepts for a response-dependence theorist of concepts?

The synonymy criterion won't do for two reasons. The first is fairly general; the second is of particular concern to the response-dependence theorist.

First, the synonymy criterion is a criterion of identity of concepts in terms of identity of meaning of terms. This requires that one identify concepts with meanings of terms, a substantial philosophical thesis. Subscribing to that thesis may or may not be motivated by the idea that a metaphysical inquiry into the nature of concepts is best approached through semantics. If, on the other hand, one wants to keep a distinction between concepts and meanings of terms, then one has only offered an epistemic criterion of the identity of concepts as a way of telling when concepts are identical, but not an account of what determines the identity itself. One has merely offered a way to detect the symptoms of the identity of concepts, but not given a constitutive criterion.<sup>12</sup>

The other, and more serious, problem with the synonymy criterion is that it is too narrow for the response-dependence theorist's project. The traditional way of understanding synonymy is to say that terms T and T' are synonymous just in case they can be substituted for each other in all contexts without loss of truth.<sup>13</sup> Other Quinean worries about the notion of synonymy aside,<sup>14</sup> it seems that substitutivity *salva veritate* is too stringent a criterion, especially for the theorist who wants to show that one concept is, despite first appearances, identical to another concept. For, if the synonymy criterion were to serve as a criterion for the identity of concepts, then it seems that there would be no open question<sup>15</sup> as to whether the concepts were identical. Either they would be obviously identical or obviously not. Where there is no room for disagreement, there is no room for theory, of the response-dependence kind or any other.

The criteria of identity for concepts that Johnston<sup>16</sup> and other response-dependence theorists of concepts use are the *same a priori conditions of application*. What are the a priori conditions of application for a concept? There is a way of understanding such conditions that raises the same problems for the response-dependence theorist as the synonymy criterion does. I do not know if this is Johnston's own preferred way of understanding them, but we do not need to settle that issue.<sup>17</sup>

On this understanding, the *a priori* conditions of application constitute the norms each concept-user consciously adheres to when applying the concept to an object. This requires that the application conditions be immediately accessible epistemically and thus it seems, again, that there is no open question whether the application conditions of one concept are the same as the application conditions of another. Again, there seems no room for a response-dependence account of a concept.

The above understanding of the application conditions of a concept is, however, also implausible for unrelated reasons. It just is implausible that there is any such measuring stick each and every concept-user checks when deciding whether to apply a concept to an object or not. I believe there is a way to refine

the notion of application conditions to take care of that worry by understanding the application conditions of a concept to be the standard each concept user is guided by, *consciously* or *implicitly*, in their use of the concept—how they are committed to using the concept, knowingly or unknowingly. These application conditions would still be knowable *a priori* in the weak sense that given sufficient prodding the concept users would acknowledge to be committed to these standards, similarly to a patient who owns up to her desires and fears on the psychoanalyst's couch. This would also be in line with Johnston's own suggestion that concepts F and G have the same application conditions just in case they share the same *non-negotiable beliefs*. The idea is that a concept is characterized by a cluster of beliefs and some of those beliefs are negotiable and others not. The application conditions are individuated by the set of non-negotiable beliefs. What determines that a belief is non-negotiable is that we would not know what talk involving the concepts in question amounted to on the hypothesis that the belief was false.<sup>18</sup> For instance, we would not know what talk of bachelors amounted to on the hypothesis that some bachelors are not male. Similarly, we would not know what talk of being red or of red things amounted to on the hypothesis that something is red and yet not coloured.<sup>19</sup>

What is the difference between the notion of being non-negotiable and those of being knowable *a priori* or being necessary? For a belief to be non-negotiable it is to be knowable *a priori* in principle, i.e. given sufficient prodding one is to be able to own up to holding the belief. It is important that, it need not be immediately accessible epistemically to the user. The apriority is, however, not to be merely as a result of the fixing of the meaning of the term, such as when I dub my cat 'Cat' and then claim to know *a priori* that my cat is called 'Cat'. I have something slightly stronger in mind. A belief is non-negotiable when it underlies a practice, is presupposed or assumed by that practice. But it need not be necessary in any deep sense: it may be necessary to the practice in the sense of being presupposed by the practice, but nevertheless not necessary simpliciter. What do I have in mind here? Let's say, for example, that the belief that bachelors are human males is a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept of being a bachelor. Arguably, it is knowable *a priori*, since given sufficient prodding one would own up to holding that belief. It is also presupposed by the practice of applying the concept of being a bachelor, but one might not think that it is necessary in any deep sense that a bachelor's being human is fixed by some metaphysical glue. This difference between a belief's being necessary and its being non-negotiable is important. The notion of non-negotiability is considerably less rigid; we can even imagine a belief's non-negotiability getting eroded with slight changes in conceptual practices over time.<sup>20</sup>

I am understanding the set of non-negotiable beliefs to be the set of beliefs concept users are committed to being true when they apply the concept. Those beliefs need not be conscious, but the hypothesis that such a belief is false threatens to make the practice of applying the concept incoherent or empty: we would not know what our practice of applying the concept amounted to on the hypothesis that the belief was false.

Let us now see what a response-dependence account of a concept would involve, given the conception of the identity of concepts just described. The aim here is to elucidate the concept in question by showing that, contrary to what one might have thought, it is in fact *identical* to a concept of being responded to in certain ways by subjects. The concepts that carry their response-dependence nature on their sleeve can be of various kinds, depending on the response in question and the conditions under which such response is to take place. To take just two examples from the literature, Johnston is particularly interested in concepts of dispositions, whereas Crispin Wright's interest lies in concepts, dispositional or not, that are such that the response in question is *judgement*. Euthyphro would, of course, be interested in the response of the gods' *love*.

Now, to show that a particular concept is response-dependent, one needs to show that it has the same non-negotiable beliefs as some concept that clearly is response-dependent, which it does just in case the non-negotiable beliefs associated with each concept represent the properties they stand for as satisfying the same conditions.

In other words, one needs to show that the two concepts involve the non-negotiable belief that something has one of the properties just in case it has the other. To put this more crisply, one needs to show that the appropriate biconditional is a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept F:

x is P<sub>F</sub> iff x induces response R in subjects S under conditions C.<sup>21</sup>

If we take the example of the concept of being red and the concept of being disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions, then one needs to show that the biconditional:

x is red iff x is disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions,

is a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept red. Care needs to be taken to decide what kind of response-dependent concept the concept of being red is to be identified with, which depends on the kind of subjective response and conditions in question. In the example above, of course, the concept is to be identified with a *response-dispositional* concept, namely, the concept of being disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions. Care needs also to be taken in specifying what *looking red* amounts to in a way that does not make the analysis circular, but we need not dwell on that now.

#### 4. The Theory at Work

To see the theory at work, consider how one might want to give an account of the difference between primary and secondary quality concepts by showing how secondary quality concepts are really identical to response-dependent concepts, whereas primary quality concepts are not.<sup>22</sup> We now know how the argument would run. Consider the concept *red* and the concept *square*. If the concept red is

response-dependent, then it is a non-negotiable belief about being red that something is red just in case it is disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions.<sup>23</sup> This is a non-negotiable belief about being red, so the argument would run, because we would not know what talk of being red amounted to on the hypothesis that the belief were false. Since it is also a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept of being disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions, what we have here are the same application conditions, and thus the same concept.

Compare with the concept *square*: if the concept *square* is *not* response-dependent, it is not a non-negotiable belief about being square that something is square just in case it is disposed to look square to normal observers under normal conditions. We can tell stories where this is false, but where we still manage to know what we are thinking and talking about. For instance, we can imagine a scenario where it is discovered that all normal observers have until now seen a very distorted view of squares and once our visual systems have been extended to include some special visual aid, we can all see what squares really look like, just as we now know that pure gold is really white and can see that it is so in a good laboratory. It is thus not part of our conditions of application of the concept *square* to something that it looks square to normal observers under normal conditions. It may be true that, as a matter of fact, all and only square things look square to normal observers under normal conditions but a commitment to that being the case does not ground the practice of using the concept of being square.

It would not be detrimental if the reader were to disagree about how to account for the concept *square*. The point is that the non-negotiability criterion distinguishes between response-dependent and response-independent concepts and that distinction can be used to account for the distinction between primary and secondary quality concepts even if a concept, which has traditionally been conceived as a primary quality concept, falls on the response-dependence side. For it is open to us to say that that's where the line should be drawn, that we were mistaken about on which side of the line the concept *square* falls and that the concept in question is, after all, a secondary quality concept. Equipped with the distinction between response-dependent concepts and response-independent ones and a good working criterion for that distinction, one can then enquire into the application conditions of any concept. If such an inquiry reveals that there is a non-negotiable belief to the effect that what the concept stands for is dependent upon human responses, then the concept in question is a response-dependent one. If it doesn't, it is response-independent.

##### **5. From Concepts to Properties: The Precise Location of the Realist/ Anti-Realist Disagreement**

On the kind of response-dependence account we are concerned with, a concept is response-dependent in virtue of what it is *of* or *about*, namely, if what it is about is a property of inducing subjective responses in given conditions. Such an account should be contrasted with a response-dependence account where a concept is



response-dependent, not in virtue of the qualities possessed by what it is about, but in virtue of some other qualities it has, such as the way it represents what it is about, or the way in which the semantic link between the concept and what it is about is fixed. Remember for instance, that on a semantic response-dependence account, a term is response-dependent because some responses, human or divine, play a role in how the reference of the term gets fixed.<sup>24</sup>

Because our response-dependent concepts are response-dependent in virtue of what they are concepts of it is clear how a general strategy for teasing out metaphysical results from a response-dependence account of a concept would go. Consider our favourite concept *red* and how one would go about drawing conclusions about the property of being red from the fact that the concept red is response-dependent. Since the concept *red* is, by hypothesis, response-dependent an appropriate biconditional is a non-negotiable belief. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that the following biconditional is a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept *red*:

x is red iff x is disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions.<sup>25</sup>

What does that tell us about the property itself? Doesn't the fact that the concept involves that non-negotiable belief show that the property itself is a dispositional property? Doesn't this show that the property of being red just is the property of being disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions? Can the non-negotiable beliefs associated with a concept be mistaken about what the property they are about is like? In my view, they cannot. In fact, it is here that the disagreement between a certain kind of realist and anti-realist emerges. Let us look at the disagreement in some detail, by considering how a realist critic might object to the move made above.

Let's assume again that the concept *red* is response-dependent, and that from that we claim that the property of being red is a response-dispositional property. The realist's objection here is not that the concept isn't response-dependent. By hypothesis, he agrees that it is. What he objects to is that anything follows from that about the property. His objections can take one of the following forms:

### 5.1 First Objection

The realist could object that the concept is misrepresenting reality. The claim here would be that the non-negotiable beliefs associated with the concept represented the property as being one way, but the property itself isn't like that. For instance, the non-negotiable beliefs might represent the property as being such that  $x$  is  $P_F$  iff  $x$  is  $P_G$ , when it simply is not the case. But such a claim is surely quite suspicious. How, and on what grounds, could one make the claim that a certain property does not conform to our non-negotiable beliefs about it? Let's be mindful that we are not talking about any old beliefs, but our *non-negotiable* beliefs about the property. Take the concept *red*. If we acknowledge that the

response-dependence account of the concept *red* is right and that the concept does indeed involve the non-negotiable belief that something is red iff it is disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions, then how is one able to claim that the property red is, after all, not so? How could one claim that something could be red, yet not be disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions?

There are two worries here, one semantic, the other epistemic:

The semantic worry concerns how one could be using the term 'red' in attempting to make such a claim. If one used it in the normal way, one would succeed in talking about our property, being red; if one used it in some unorthodox way, one would, at best, succeed in talking about some other property; at worst, one would be talking about nothing at all. It just doesn't seem that one can coherently make such a claim about our property of being red.

The epistemic worry concerns the grounds for the supposed claim. What epistemic access does one have to the property of being red such that one can claim that the non-negotiable beliefs associated with our concept *red*, i.e. the core of our beliefs about red, misrepresent the property itself? Both the semantic worry and the epistemic worry are fuelled by the belief that the claim that the concept misrepresents the property rests on problematic assumptions about our semantic and epistemic access to properties independently of our concepts. Such assumptions have frequently been associated with a God's-eye realist view of what inhabits reality and a corresponding radical scepticism about our access to those inhabitants. The position that I advocate involves the commitment that the non-negotiable beliefs about a property represent the property as it really is, provided these beliefs are consistent. Given that position, an argument for the claim that a certain concept is response-dependent is *ipso facto* an argument for the claim that something has the property that the concept is about just in case it is responded to in the requisite way, not merely as a matter of fact, but non-negotiably so. In other words, the argument for the response-dependence of the concept is *ipso facto* an argument for the claim that the property it is about is dependent upon human responses.

## 5.2 Second Objection

Questioning the thesis that the non-negotiable beliefs associated with our concepts represent the properties as they really are is, however, precisely what a certain other kind of realist wants to do. This is the second kind of objection a realist could offer and it is slightly weaker than the first one. This objection is not that our concepts misrepresent reality, but rather that an analysis or elucidation of a concept is just that: it tells us about how we think or conceive of the property, but not about the property itself.<sup>26</sup> In this case, the objection takes the form of insisting that a concept can be response-dependent although the property it is supposedly about is not dependent upon human responses in the requisite ways—is not conferred by humans responses, as I like to put it:<sup>27</sup>

Consider the two concepts of *having Ada's favourite mathematical property* and of *being a perfect number*. Let's assume that Ada's favourite mathematical property is that of being a perfect number.<sup>28</sup> Isn't it the case, then, that both the concept of having Ada's favourite mathematical property and of being a perfect number are about the same property, namely of being a perfect number? But if so, then the concept *having Ada's favourite mathematical property* represents the property it stands for as being response-dependent, since it is a non-negotiable belief about the property that something has it just in case Ada has a certain attitude towards it. On the other hand, the property of being perfect isn't response-dependent and whether a certain number is perfect certainly does not depend on what the attitudes of a particular individual are. If its divisors add up to the number then it is perfect; if not, it is not perfect, *pace* Ada and her attitudes. Hence, the response-dependence of concepts does not yield the desired conclusions about the properties these concepts are about.

My response to this objection is that we don't merely have two concepts here, we have two properties. Having Ada's favourite mathematical property and being a perfect number are two properties. If Ada changes her tastes and starts to favour the property of being a Mersenne prime<sup>29</sup> then the number six ceases to have Ada's favourite mathematical property, but continues to be perfect. Hence, the two properties are not identical although something can have both at some time. Furthermore, the property a particular concept is about, as I am using that relation of *aboutness*, is the property specified by the non-negotiable beliefs. In the case above, the non-negotiable beliefs associated with the concept *having Ada's favourite mathematical property* do not single out being perfect, precisely because we can imagine a scenario in which something is perfect but does not have Ada's favourite mathematical property. Similarly, we can imagine a scenario in which something has Ada's favourite mathematical property but isn't perfect: the number five is a Mersenne prime, but despite that distinction it isn't perfect.

It is, however, precisely the conception of the relation between concepts and properties that underlies the above response that this kind of realist critic is likely to object to. On the view he subscribes to the relationship between concepts and properties is not particularly close and there can be more than one concept of the same property.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, his conception may allow for property identities to be discovered by empirical investigation, such as being hot = having a certain amount of molecular motion and being water = having molecular structure H<sub>2</sub>O.<sup>31</sup> Hilary Putnam discusses this realist conception and contrasts it with what he takes to be a more traditional way to think of concepts and properties where there are very strong epistemic ties between concepts and properties in 'On Properties' (Putnam 1975). It is the more traditional way to think of concepts and properties that I adhere to here; let's call the conception the 'traditional' conception, because of its heritage. On the realist conception, the relationship between concepts and the properties they are about is akin to the relationship between concepts of particulars and the particulars they are about, such as the concept of Aristotle and Aristotle. On the traditional conception, there can be a marked difference between the relationship between concepts of properties and

the properties they are about on the one hand and concepts of particulars and those particulars on the other.<sup>32</sup>

The dispute here is more than simply verbal; it concerns how close the epistemic ties are between our concepts of properties and the properties themselves. On the traditional conception there is a very close relationship between our concepts and the properties these concepts are about: the non-negotiable beliefs not only individuate the concepts, but they accurately describe the properties as well. As the slogan could go: *The properties are mere shadows of the concepts*. We can consider this to be a modest *shadow theory* about properties, because on this view the properties conform to our non-negotiable beliefs about them: properties conform to our concepts of them; not the other way around.

Although I describe this as a shadow theory of properties, I should make clear that no (metaphysical) stand need be taken at this point in the debate among realists, nominalists, and conceptualists about the status of properties. The traditional conception, or shadow theory, is first and foremost an *epistemic* thesis and compatible with different metaphysical pictures, even with a certain kind of rationalist picture.<sup>33</sup>

It should now be clear that if one subscribes to the traditional conception of the relationship between concepts and properties, then a response-dependence account of a concept is *ipso facto* a response-dependence account of the property the concept is about. But is it plausible to subscribe to the traditional conception? Perhaps it is simply an old relic of an outdated philosophical world view and should be discarded? I think not. I think it is both coherent and plausible. I won't try to convince the sceptical readers that they themselves should adhere to it, but I do want to convince them that it is possible to do so and that the traditional conception isn't too high a price to pay for someone interested in offering a conferral account of a property. To see this consider the following objection:<sup>34</sup>

The traditional conception might seem rather unattractive. It seems that you are committed to saying some unhappy things. For instance, would you also claim that the concept of being-the-same-object-as-Hesperus and of being-the-same-object-as-Phosphorus are of distinct properties? If not, why not? If so, are you then not committed to denying that Hesperus = Phosphorus? This is not just a standard philosophical assumption, it's in astronomy textbooks.

The position I advocate does not find itself in these dire straits. There are several ways to respond to this objection.

First of all, one might choose to be a traditionalist about some properties, but not others. For instance, one might want to be a traditionalist about all non-natural properties,<sup>35</sup> but realist about others. I suspect many readers would be attracted to this option.

To guard against the worry that selective traditionalism amounts to a conferralism about that property and hence one cannot help oneself to traditionalism about some property P if one wants to argue that P is conferred by showing that the concept of it is response-dependent, consider this: the traditional conception is first and foremost an epistemic thesis, and concerns whether the non-negotiable beliefs associated with the concept of the property

can get the property wrong or not. The traditional conception is the thesis that they can't; the property in question conforms to our non-negotiable beliefs about it. This thesis is independent from the thesis that a particular property is conferred: If a concept has non-negotiable beliefs that entail that the concept is response-dependent, then the traditional conception licenses us to conclude that the property the concept is of is conferred. If a concept, on the other hand, has non-negotiable beliefs to the effect that the concept is not response-dependent, then the traditional conception licenses us to conclude that the property the concept is of is not conferred. Since not all concepts are response-dependent, not all properties are conferred, irrespective of whether one selectively or wholly adheres to the traditional conception.

Secondly, if one wants to be traditionalist about all properties one needs to be committed to the view that the concept of being-the-same-object-as-Hesperus and the concept of being-the-same-object-as-Phosphorus are concepts of two distinct properties. Since properties are shadows of concepts, if one wanted to claim that they were concepts of the same property, then one would have to show that they shared the same non-negotiable beliefs. Given that it was a major empirical discovery that something has the property of being-the-same-as-Hesperus just in case it has the property of being-the-same-as-Phosphorus, this is a very unattractive route. Since the identity statement:

Hesperus = Phosphorus

is knowable only *a posteriori*, the biconditional:

x is-the-same-as-Hesperus iff x is-the-same-as-Phosphorus

had better be so also. Hence it is not a non-negotiable belief associated with the concepts in question. Hundreds of sessions on the semanticoanalyst's couch are not going to reveal anything different. If the biconditional isn't knowable *a priori*, then it isn't non-negotiable and hence the concepts in question aren't identical.

Importantly, however, the claim that what we have here are two different concepts of two different properties does not force one to deny that Hesperus = Phosphorus:

First, one can say that being the same object as Hesperus is a different property from being the same object as Phosphorus, but deny that this commits one to holding that Hesperus, the object, is not identical to Phosphorus, the object. There seems to me nothing wrong with this option. In fact, it underscores the epistemic ties we have with the properties that inhabit our world. If one welcomes those epistemic ties, one should welcome this option. This option is available irrespective of one's theory of names, except only the most extreme versions of the direct reference theory of names, although it may go more naturally with a neo-Fregean account of names.

Secondly, one can say that being the same object as Hesperus and being the same object as Phosphorus are *bogus* properties, either because they essentially involve

particulars in their individuation or because they involve the identity relation. The claim would be that these properties are somehow *impure*. There is a long history of making a distinction between properties in this way, but a lot more needs to be said to make a distinction between pure and impure properties, and to show that such a distinction is compatible with the traditional conception. I won't undertake that here. I merely want to note these possible lines of response to guard against the fear that the traditional conception is simply and obviously too high a price to pay for anyone wishing to get a conferral account of a property from a response-dependence account of the concept of that property. I hope I have shown that not only is it a coherent conception, but that Euthyphro and his friends in the 21st century may even find it a particularly attractive position. But it should likewise be clear that if one wants to reject the claim that a response-dependence account of concepts yields metaphysical conclusions about the properties these concepts are about, it is exactly at this point in the development that one should object.

## 6. Conferred Properties

I have argued that a response-dependence account of a concept can yield metaphysical conclusions about the property the concept is about, if the traditional conception is subscribed to. It is now time to turn to the question whether the metaphysical conclusions are that the property in question is *conferred*.

Let's start with the concept red and a response-dependence account of that concept according to which the following biconditional is a non-negotiable belief:

x is red iff x is disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions.

I argued before that this shows that the property of being red is a response-dispositional property. But is it conferred? Do the normal observers confer the property of being red on the object in question? Is it in virtue of the fact that the object in question is disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions that it is red? Yes, it is: for something to be red *just is* for it to be disposed to be responded to in the relevant ways. If the biconditional is non-negotiable, then the property of being red is a conferred property.

Euthyphro's case is even crisper. Consider what it would be for the concept *pious* to be response-dependent, as I have characterized the notion. This would mean that the the concept *pious* is such that it involves a biconditional of the following kind as a non-negotiable belief:

x is pious iff x induces love in the Greek gods.

Euthyphro should, according to our story, be committed to the view that it is unclear what talk of being pious would amount to on the hypothesis that this belief were false. For instance, it is to be unclear what we would be talking about if we said that someone's action were pious, yet not loved by the gods. Isn't this a way to

flesh out Euthyphro's initial position? I think it is. If Euthyphro wants to claim that the property of being pious is a conferred property, he should insist to be mystified as to what talk involving the concept of being pious amounts to, on the hypothesis that the relevant biconditional is false. If being pious is a property conferred on an action in virtue of the attitudes the gods have to it, what would it mean to say that, say, Euthyphro's own action towards his father was pious, yet not loved by the gods? Euthyphro should be happy with the position we attribute to him here.

Socrates should also be happy with his lot. On this analysis, Socrates should be committed to the view that it makes perfectly good and quite unmysterious sense to talk about being pious on the hypothesis that the relevant biconditional is false. According to our story, Socrates should insist, and probably would happily insist, that, say, Hypatia's actions could be pious, yet not loved by the gods.<sup>36</sup>

I thus conclude that offering a response-dependence account of a concept, and adhering to the traditional conception about the relationship between concepts and properties, is a way to side with Euthyphro about being pious as well as any other property. Such an account yields that the property in question is conferred.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

Let us take stock. I have argued that one can give a conferral account of a certain property by arguing that the concept of the property is response-dependent, if one is willing to assume the traditional conception of the epistemic access we have to properties through our concepts. I have stressed that one need not accept the traditional conception wholesale and that selectivity is permitted, although being a traditionalist through and through is perfectly coherent and plausible in my view. In conclusion I want to offer a couple of remarks on the status of a response-dependence account of a concept and its uses for an anti-realist project. First the status of the account:

Since this kind of response-dependence account is offered at the level of concepts, an opponent can only offer two kinds of objection. Firstly, he can object to the account as an account of our ordinary concept F; he can say that in fact our ordinary concept F does not involve such a non-negotiable belief and thus reject the response-dependence account of the concept F as empirically flawed. This first line of objection open to the opponent of a response-dependence theorist is certainly coherent, and it seems quite clear what would settle the dispute. It might take considerable self-examination to discover what some particular application conditions are, but ultimately such an examination should reveal what epistemic commitments the concept involves: either the concept involves the non-negotiable belief or not.

Secondly, the opponent can admit that the response-dependence account does in fact capture our ordinary concept F; the concept does in fact involve such a non-negotiable belief. Unfortunately, however, this is merely an accurate account of our concepts; nothing more. He will deny that we have the same epistemic access to properties that the traditional conception I am advocating allows for.

But denying that epistemic access is itself a substantive philosophical position that needs to be argued for, not merely assumed.

Finally I turn to the question what role there might be for a conferral account of a property in an anti-realist project which is fuelled by the desire to take seriously the idea that an aspect of the world might be dependent upon us, our thought, or our practices. Not all anti-realist projects are fuelled by such a desire, but consider those that are. Consider, e.g., someone who feels that way about the aesthetic aspect of the world or the moral. That intuition could well be articulated as the claim that aesthetic properties or moral properties are conferred. But what the present model offers is not merely a way to state that claim, but to argue for it by arguing that the concept in question is response-dependent. An anti-realist who is happily committed to a close relationship between concepts and properties, and thereby a close relationship between our thoughts and beliefs about properties and the properties themselves, should be particularly happy to see those close connections revealed in the conferral account of the property in question.<sup>37</sup>

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Plato 1578: 10a.
- <sup>2</sup> The standard works are Johnston 1993, Pettit 1991, and Wright 1992.
- <sup>3</sup> Wedgwood 1998 is an exception.
- <sup>4</sup> Pettit 1991 is a key example of such an account.
- <sup>5</sup> Johnston 1993 is an example of such an account.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, Wedgwood 1998.
- <sup>7</sup> Here I am focusing exclusively on terms that refer to properties, as opposed to objects or stuffs. This is also the focus in the semantic response-dependence literature.
- <sup>8</sup> Here I follow Johnston 1993.
- <sup>9</sup> Here I draw on Johnston 1993: 103.
- <sup>10</sup> It is also important to give an account of what looking red amounts to so as to avoid circularity, but we will bypass that issue.
- <sup>11</sup> This distinction is generally not adhered to in the literature, by Johnston or others.
- <sup>12</sup> For this distinction see Wittgenstein 1958: §354.
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Frege 1892: 34 and Frege 1884: §64, where Frege cites Leibniz 1875–1890, 2: 228.
- <sup>14</sup> See Quine 1953.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. Moore 1903: ch. 1.
- <sup>16</sup> Johnston 1993: 103.
- <sup>17</sup> Pettit 1991: 601 ff. takes this view of Johnston's *application conditions*.
- <sup>18</sup> Johnston 1993: 103.
- <sup>19</sup> Someone might object now that it is not a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept red that if something is red, then it is coloured, and give the example of someone being described as being red because of her leftist political beliefs, as Rosa Luxemburg was



(‘Red Rosa’). To make the objection even crisper one might say that Rosa’s *beliefs* were red, though not coloured. But clearly the correct response to such an objection is to insist that such usage of the term red involves a different concept from our ordinary colour concept.

<sup>20</sup> Consider, e.g., the case of the—at first metaphorical—use of the concept of bachelor as applied to male cats, a use that then begins over time to change the practice of applying the concept bachelor. Over time, the belief that bachelors were human would then cease to be a non-negotiable belief. On my view, this would amount to a change in concept: we used to employ one concept and had ceased to and now employed another one.

<sup>21</sup>  $P_F$  is the property the concept F is of.

<sup>22</sup> This was the explicit concern of Johnston in Johnston 1993.

<sup>23</sup> Here I use Johnston’s own dispositional account as the example.

<sup>24</sup> I am not using ‘term’ in a technical sense, and intend to include predicates as terms. I also take the reference of a predicate to be a property.

<sup>25</sup> Where conditions of normalcy are specified substantially and it is articulated in a non-circular manner what *looking red* amounts to.

<sup>26</sup> Ironically, sometimes this view is taken to be influenced by a certain reading of Kant, according to which we can only know things as they are for us, and not as they are in themselves. Cf. Lowe 1998: 23 ff. and Loux 2002: 6 ff.

<sup>27</sup> A version of this argument is to be found in Wedgwood 1998: 37.

<sup>28</sup> A number is perfect just in case it equals the sum of its divisors. The first three perfect numbers are 6 ( $= 1+2+3$ ), 28 ( $= 1+2+4+7+14$ ), and 496 ( $= 1+2+4+8+16+31+62+124+248$ ).

<sup>29</sup> When a number  $m = 2^n - 1$  is prime it is said to be a ‘Mersenne prime’.

<sup>30</sup> This is a common realist view. Cf., e.g., Peacocke 1992: 2 and Yablo 1995.

<sup>31</sup> Note that I can allow for identities such as  $\text{water} = \text{H}_2\text{O}$ , but they are identities of stuffs, and not properties.

<sup>32</sup> I do not wish to rule out that someone could want to keep a close connection between concepts and both the properties and the particulars they are about. I am, however, not advocating such a view here.

<sup>33</sup> Although I am not advocating such a picture here.

<sup>34</sup> Thanks to Stephen Yablo.

<sup>35</sup> Such properties must be defined independently of the considerations pertaining to the response-dependence status of the concept of the property if one wants to use the argument outlined in this paper to argue for the claim that the property in question is conferred.

<sup>36</sup> Unless Socrates thinks the gods are omniscient, but let’s put that possibility aside.

<sup>37</sup> A number of people have read earlier versions of this paper or talked with me about the issues raised in it, although none of them is responsible for the views herein, or any remaining shortcomings. I would like to thank Alex Byrne, Andy Egan, Iris Einheuser, Nathaniel Goldberg, Elizabeth Harman, Ishani Maitra, Mary Kate McGowen, Sarah McGrath, Adina Roskies, Robert Stalnaker, Christopher Sturr, Catherine Wearing, Ralph Wedgwood, and Stephen Yablo. I owe a special debt to Jennifer Church, Catherine Elgin, Sally Haslanger, Rebecca McLennan and Judith Jarvis Thomson.

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