

ON HAVING THE RIGHT FEELINGS: ADEQUATE RESPONSES IN MARK JOHNSTON'S RESPONSE-DEPENDENCE THEORY OF VALUE

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This essay outlines and explores a strand in metaethics that is concerned with grounding values in our emotional responses to the world around us. These response-dependence theories of moral value do this by constructing an analogy between values and secondary properties, so as to build a moral realism that is able to account for our intuition that evaluative thought holds information about the way the world actually is without thereby postulating the existence of substantive value-properties. The main challenge for the response-dependence theorist is to give an account of how we can talk of appropriate emotional responses – an account needed in order to avoid radical subjectivism. This essay looks in particular at Mark Johnston's account of adequate responses as determined by practical reasoning.

I. When we utter moral statements, we take it that these are either true or false. Against the claims of the non-cognitivist, I take myself to be doing more than expressing my dislike in stating that “it was wrong of you to steal my bicycle”: I am making a claim to objectivity, a claim about the way the world is. Yet, as the moral error-theorist will be quick to point out, showing in virtue of what my statement is – or at least could be – true is a difficult task. As J. L. Mackie famously argued, if there are mind-independent non-natural moral properties, these must be very queer properties indeed, wholly different from all other properties we know anything about. The main challenge for the moral realist outlined by Mackie and the error-theorists has thus been that of giving an account of how we can gain access to any objective morality.

Against this background, a fairly recent strand in philosophy has been concerned with linking values to secondary properties in order to build a moral realism that is sensitive to this difficulty. The error theorist's challenge to the moral realist is posed in terms of what, since Locke, have been known as primary qualities: the properties of objects that are metaphysically independent of any observer. That is, measurable properties of physical reality. Secondary properties, on the other hand, are “nothing in the objects

themselves but power to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities, i.e. by the bulk, figure, texture, and motion of their insensible parts, as colours, sounds, tastes, &c” (Locke 1996:49).

The analogy between values and secondary properties works to accommodate the two intuitions that i) our moral utterances have – or at least can have – truth-values and ii) that these utterances have truth-values in terms of properties that genuinely belong to their object(s), without presupposing that these properties are “in the world” in the same way as atoms, molecules or teacups are.

Those who put forward the analogy between values and secondary properties have particularly been concerned with constructing a comparison between values and colours. The attraction of comparing values to colours lies in that we can talk about colours in the language of objectivity without being committed to the claim that they belong to objects like physical properties do; this is because we have managed to agree upon a stable standard of adequacy in terms of the responses various coloured objects elicit in us. You and I agree that the tea we are drinking is woody brown, because we both have a “woody brown” experience in perceiving it; and our judgement that our drink, in fact, has this colour is not swayed by a third party judging it to

be black after the lights have gone out, because we take it (and hopefully our interlocutor will agree) that she has not seen the drink in conditions appropriate for having the relevant experience. Nor are we swayed by the judgement of a fourth party who sees the tea as grey even after the lights have been put back on, once we learn about her colour-blindness, i.e. her inability to have the relevant “woody brown” experience. Notice that all of these considerations are, of course, wholly consistent with individual atoms not being coloured, and therefore do not commit us to any metaphysical acceptance of non-natural mind-independent colour properties.

Theories of value that employ the analogy with colours are thus appropriately named response-dependence theories, since they hold that the value of an object is somehow dependent on the response we have to it. As we shall see, one form of response-dependence theory takes it that this dependency consists in the responses tracking values that exist in the external world, whilst another holds that our responses are constitutive of the values themselves. The colour-values analogy is often pushed for evaluative concepts in general, but I will in this essay focus on moral values.

So, analogously to how the subjective experience (what some philosophers call qualia) of, for example, red-seeing is the relevant response in our discourse about the colour red, the relevant responses in the realm of moral values are our emotional responses. My judgement that it is wrong for you to take my bicycle is thus grounded in my negative emotional response to this state of affairs. But now imagine that you do not share my response, and that you are bemused by my assertion that what you are doing is morally wrong. Perhaps, once you understand that it is, in fact, my bicycle you are riding, your attitude will change and your judgement with it. But imagine for the sake of argument that you do not; you maintain that you have done nothing wrong. The challenge for the response-dependence theorist should now be apparent: in order for the theory not to reduce to a radical subjectivism where any response would be equally valid, we need an account of how we can determine the appropriate response to a given object or state of affairs. Without such an account, the response-dependence theorist can hardly make plausible her promise of grounding (objective) morality in our sentiments. In evoking such a standard of adequacy, response-dependence theories have a clear extension from metaethics to concerns of ethics; since they grant that ob-

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jects or states of affairs have value in virtue of the responses they elicit, and are searching for a standard by which we can determine appropriate responses to these, we must engage with the normative question of what responses moral agents ought to have. Notice, however, that in order for the response-dependence theories to keep their appealing aspect of grounding morality in our sentiments, the standard by which we determine adequate responses (and consequently, answer the question of what responses we ought to have) must be made by reference to how people actually are. If no such link to people’s actual embodiment and minds – and thus to how they respond to the world – is made, we are in danger of merely dictating what responses people should have without any sufficient grounds. This is, as we shall see later, a crucial aspect of the response-dependence theory.

In what follows, I will be concerned with Mark Johnston’s contribution to this debate. Johnston offers a bottom-up approach, taking as its starting point our immediate emotional responses, and introduces practical reasoning as a tool by which we can improve our understanding of value and, accordingly, of what constitutes adequate emotional responses. This, I will argue, makes for a metaphysically and practically appealing position, grounded in a phenomenally plausible picture of how we engage with moral questions. I will, however, also argue that the account faces one serious challenge to which it needs to provide a coherent answer. The remainder of the essay will have the following structure: in II, I will introduce John McDowell’s early formulation of the analogy, focusing in particular on his notion of a merited emotional response. I will here also make some further remarks on the appeal of the “middle-ground realism” that response-dependence theories offer. I will then, in III, outline Johnston’s view by way of his rejection of McDowell’s perceptual model. In IV, I will flesh out Johnston’s appeal to practical reasoning for determining what constitutes an adequate response, arguing that this appeal will in practice lead to a communicative “public reasons” discourse. In V, I raise an issue with the practical reasoning criterion and its relation to the agent, arguing that there seems to be a discrepancy in Johnston’s story between the agent as a practical reasoner and as an emotional subject. I will go on to suggest that the response to this problem could be found in a psychological account of how the subject can undergo change.

II. John McDowell's introduction of the colour-value analogy in his now-famous "Values and Secondary Qualities" takes its cue from Mackie's comparison of secondary qualities and evaluative concepts (1985:110–11). Mackie and McDowell agree with the sentiment echoed at the start of this essay: that evaluative thought presents itself as holding relevant information about the way the world actually is. This being the way evaluative thought appears to us, McDowell argues, "an attempt to accept the appearances makes it virtually irresistible to appeal to a perceptual model" (1985:110, my emphasis). Mackie holds that such a model must take the form of perceptual awareness of primary qualities, something that would be at best implausible, seeing as this would amount to the claim that we can (seemingly by way of some moral sense-like faculty) have straight-forward perceptual access to objective moral values. McDowell agrees that this would be implausible, but, whereas Mackie follows Locke in taking secondary qualities to involve a "projective error" which makes us conceive of secondary qualities in a manner appropriate only for primary qualities, McDowell suggests that his conception is mistaken. Against Mackie's insistence that colour and other secondary qualities cannot be genuine properties of objects, since these can only be referred to by way of subjective experience (which, on Mackie's view, is synonymous with illusion and error), McDowell points out that there is stability in our subjective experience of the world and that we can thus see that secondary properties have representational significance. It is, therefore, a

mistake to take external reality "as having only an objective nature" (1985:117).

Secondary qualities have, on McDowell's picture, representational significance in that they are disposed to give rise to certain subjective experiences, and that they do this with some level of stability. In order to account for values in this way, he must therefore establish a stable relation between how the world is and how we (emotionally) respond to it. McDowell begins sketching this relation by introducing the notion of merited responses (1985:118); using an analogy between the two components of the evaluative concept-response pair 'dangerous-fear', he plausibly makes the case that we ask whether our object of fear merits this response. To take an example, if I am scared by a large shadow that suddenly appears from behind a tree when I am walking on my way home at night, I will (perhaps after an initial shock) look closer to see if the shadow belongs to a fallen branch or a werewolf. And after I have established that the object of my fear was, after all, merely a fallen branch, I conclude that the object of my fear does not merit my response. It is by virtue of this process we deem phobias – at least on some level – to be irrational; an astrophobic person has a strong emotional response to thunder and lightning, and whilst we agree that lightning is dangerous if we are, for example, in a boat in the middle of a lake, we take the astrophobic's fear to be disproportional to the level of danger that stormy weather normally poses. It should be clear from both of these examples that the objects merits (or fails to merit) our responses by virtue of the way the world actually is. Analogously, then, to

this process of asking whether objects merit fear, we can ask whether they merit moral approval (McDowell 1985:120).

In addition to the appealing features (noted above) of i) granting value statements truth-conditions that are straightforwardly evaluable and ii) making values genuine properties of objects, McDowell makes a response-dependence theory of value look attractive because of how it can account for being mistaken about value. For making a proper moral judgement, on this picture, we need to be in the possession of the relevant facts. So, in the

same way we say that John is mistaken about the actual colour of the tie he shows Jim when he has only seen the tie under particular lighting conditions, in which the tie appears, for example, to be green instead of blue (like in Wilfrid Sellars's well-known example (1991:143)), you can be mistaken in your judgement that it would be nice of you to put honey in my tea – due, perhaps, to your ignorance of my diabetes. We make sense of these mistakes by asking questions about merit, that is, if our sentiments are appropriate for their object, given the way the world actually is. On McDowell's view, then, we determine the appropriateness of our response by considering whether it is a response to the actual state of the world. Further, we should notice that the response-dependence view looks particularly appealing because of its focus on our experienced emotional life: essentially belonging to my ground for morally objecting to a state of affairs is – in addition to considerations of merit – my emotional response to it. It therefore looks very capable of dealing with questions of moral motivation.

III. Mark Johnston builds his account of values as response-dependent concepts from a rejection of McDowell's perceptual model of the colour analogy, developing an argument that puts the complexity of our evaluative concepts in focus (1989). Johnston begins his argument by noting that McDowell frames the analogy in terms of the dispositions of objects (to cause certain responses in certain (ideal) perceivers under certain (ideal) conditions (1989:140). This, Johnston argues, looks wrong for the case of values. Even if we grant that the dispositional model works for secondary qualities in general – something Johnston, in fact, doubts (1989:140) – values seem far too complex for us to plausibly explain them using a quasi-perceptual model; how can we, Johnston asks, on any plausible formulation, be said to have a perceptual acquaintance “in discerning the value of such things as truth, justice and the American Way” (1989:142)? When we talk about colours, our talk is relatively specific; talk about values, on the other hand, is “almost fantastically” abstract, involving an enormous amount of reasons for why a given object could be valuable. Further, the dispositional response-dependence formulation offered by McDowell is unable to differentiate between finding reason to value something and us finding

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good reason to value it (1989:144). These shortcomings of the perceptual formulation of response-dependence, Johnston argues, stems from the presupposition that what merits our response is contained in the external world. On this formulation, the subject takes a passive role, the faculty determining the truth-condition of a value judgement being held by the object. The upshot of McDowell's response-dependence is, then, that the subject's responses track values that are to be found in the external world, and this seems to postulate the sort of mysterious value-tracking-faculty that McDowell himself agreed with Mackie was implausible.

The alternative to the perceptual model of response-dependence is then, Johnston argues, to hold that evaluational concepts are response-dependent concepts (1989:145). In making this move from a perceptual to a conceptual model, Johnston grants our responses an even more significant role in our evaluative discourse, holding that our sentiments do not track values that are already present, but rather that they are themselves constitutive of the values. On this picture, evaluative judgements are judgements about causal relations between individuals and the world – or, more precisely, between me, and the world. The underlying point of these considerations is that our responses to the world around us are informed by our vulnerabilities, that is, the particular characteristics of our embodiment and mind. Our bodies and minds make us vulnerable to the world around us in different ways: being tall will – presumably – make you particularly alert of the dangers posed by door frames; having experienced rejection in the past will – hopefully – make me particularly attentive

to the downside of romantic relationships or engaging in academic endeavours. Our vulnerabilities thus influence our perspectives on the world in real and significant ways. This point underlies Johnston's rejection of David Lewis's “intuitivist response-dependence account” by which x is a value if and only if “we would be disposed to value x under conditions of the fullest imaginative acquaintance with it” (1989:149). Johnston's rejection of this account is based on its failure to accommodate the role critical reflection plays in valuing; vivid imaginative awareness of something seems not to provide us with sufficient reasons for holding it to be valuable. Consider, to use Johnston's own example, the gambler who very keenly imagines the

pleasures and benefits of winning, in spite of, in reality, hardly ever doing so; on Lewis's account there is nothing stopping the gambler from valuing being a gambler, even though this is to his great disadvantage. The way in which we value things is, as the example of the gambler points out, highly informed by our vulnerabilities (our strengths, weaknesses, desires), and our account of what constitutes an adequate response, and thus what is actually valuable, must therefore involve some constraint of critical reflection (1989:155).

Johnston argues that this constraint of critical reflection cannot, as some suggest, be separated from our vulnerabilities by way of some "impartial judge account" (like those one finds in simplistic readings of Adam Smith's moral theory), where such a judge is an ideal observer who holds all the relevant information and is not emotionally connected to the matter at hand. Echoing his previous argument against Lewis, Johnston attacks such a conception by highlighting the discrepancy between value and valuing: "upon being told the difference between my evaluation and that of the "ideal" observer, I may say, without showing any contempt for reason or value, 'So What?'" (1989:157). Our criterion of critical reflection must, then, be able to appeal to us as we actually are, rather than by way of some "what you would have valued"-account (1989:161). The critical constraint Johnston offers is formulated in terms of substantive reasonableness: "one who infers to the best explanation of phenomena, which involves more than maintaining probabilistic consistency in the face of the phenomena, is substantively reasonable, as is one who jumps into a swimming pool to save his drowning father-in-law even though it will mean getting his pants wet" (1989:162).

IV. Johnston's response to the subjectivist challenge, then, is formulated in terms of us engaging with our emotional responses to the world around us, by means of our faculty for practical reasoning. Johnston describes this process by way of four criteria of evaluation, the first being:

- (1) x is a value if and only if substantive reason is on the side of valuing x (162).

And as we concluded in III, we now need an account of what constitutes such a substantive reason. Johnston thus adds:

- (2) y is a substantive reason for/against valuing x if and only if we are disposed stably to take it to be so under conditions of increasing information and

critical reflection (162).

What is now needed is a method by which we can weight different reasons for and against valuing x . And this method must, of course, undergo the same scrutiny by critical reflection as y must in (2), so that we can rid ourselves with the possibility of being swayed by prejudice, self-deception, sour-grapes, and the like:

- (3) A method for weighting substantive reasons is an acceptable method for determining whether the weight of substantive reason is on the side of valuing x if and only if we are disposed to stably take it to be so under conditions of increasing information and critical reflection (163).

We thus get:

- (4) Substantive reason is on the side of valuing x if and only if this is so according to one and all methods of weighting the reasons for and against valuing x (164).

This formulation of our criteria may sound complicated and abstract, but what it says is the following: human beings are such as to have emotional responses to objects and states of affairs. These responses are highly contingent on our vulnerabilities, making us respond differently to the same world. Since it is not only the external objects of the world, but also my response – i.e. my vulnerabilities – that set the standards of adequacy, a crucial role of morality becomes to align our responses. When we are faced with instances of moral disagreement, therefore, we must engage in a process of attempting to understand the disagreement. In engaging in such a process we do two things: we grant that our interlocutor is similar to us in being vulnerable, and we grant that she is different, for the exact same reason, since her vulnerabilities are likely to be different from mine. A crucial part of this process of understanding moral disagreement – and thus to establish the value of x – is making our vulnerabilities intelligible to others. Our particular vulnerabilities will, of course, be pieces of very relevant information (recall again your idea of putting honey in my tea). An underlying aspect of this process, and indeed a strong reason for wanting to ground our values in our sentiments, is that we are empathic creatures; once we are provided with information about how others perceive the world and our relevant moral dispute, we attempt to put ourselves in their position, taking their perspective. Determining moral value, on the present ac-

count, thus turns into a discourse about public reasons – that is, reasons that can be shared by all members of the moral community – where each agent presents her moral response to the matter at hand, by reference to her vulnerabilities, and attempt to understand the responses of the other agents via a process of increasing information and critical reflection. We are left with a way of coherently restricting the responses that count as appropriate; we can deem morally illegitimate those doctrines, views, etc. that fail to take into account the validity of other agent’s claims to have their vulnerabilities taken into account, since these are incoherent given that we make exactly the same claims upon others. Johnston thus employs a bottom-up approach to moral questions, starting with our immediate emotional responses to the world around us and working from there to ask about their adequacy. This paints, I think, a plausible picture of how we actually engage with moral questions. To illustrate this point, consider how Johnston can account for historical moral progress. Resolving moral conflict on the present account involves engaging in a process where we make clear our vulnerabilities – the way we are different – by reference to the way we are similar; that is, our i) being vulnerable beings, and ii) being practitioners of practical reason. The standard by which we determine moral value must therefore withstand a condition of practical reason, which takes as its starting point not only our own emotional responses, but also those of our interlocutors. Considering the historical practices of racism, homophobia and sexism, we are in a position to deem these morally obnoxious, since we can conclude that over many years of increasing information (about, for example, our similarity in being vulnerable in different ways) and critical reflection (about, for example, religious bias) these doctrines do not withstand practical reason. The processes that have rendered these morally illegitimate have, crucially, been advanced by members of the relevant groups, who have advocated their responses and vulnerabilities. Those who defend racist, homophobic or sexist doctrines fail to meet such a condition, and can thus not expect others to share these; substantive reason is not on the side of valuing these doctrines.

V. I have so far argued that Johnston’s response-dependence account looks plausible, both for its phenomenological

description of how we improve upon our initial responses to the objects and states of affairs we encounter, and for its practical implications about what form of moral process one should engage in. There is, however, a possible problem with Johnston’s account of a substantive reason. One can question the compatibility of the two sides of a moral agent: the one that engages in practical reasoning by taking perspectives, gathering information and weighting perspectives, and the other who has immediate responses to her surroundings. We can call these two sides of the agent the practical reasoner and the subject, respectively.

The issue of discrepancy between these two can be brought out by considering the form of responses Johnston has in mind in his framework; true to his bottom-up approach, it is clear that he takes evaluative responses to present themselves as very immediate expressions of liking or disliking, as appealing or repellent (2001:181). We have a stance on the world that is set by our particular vulnerabilities, and we respond emotionally to the objects and states of affairs we encounter; we have an affective stance that provides a “structure” to our practical life, if you will.

This places a lot of stress on our empathic capacities, since it implies that we hold the capacity to change our emotional responses – or at least the strength of these responses – after engaging in practical reasoning.

Johnston thus writes that the “affective disclosure of value is the beginning of our ethical life. So our ethical life is already richly underway before some of affect’s disclosures are registered at the level of evaluative belief” (Johnston 2001:183n2). In a process of moral conflict, then, we can imagine the agent being presented with – by the subject – an emotional response to the given state of af-

fairs; the practical reasoner then considers this emotional response by engaging in a process of gathering information and critically reflecting on the matter at hand. Yet, a question that now needs answering is this: what happens if the subject remains unmoved by the practical reasoner’s judgement that the current response is not one the agent should endorse? In other words, wherein lies the actual room to improve upon our responses? One might here be tempted to ask what the problem is; surely, we can hold that the rational thing to do is to try to align our subjective responses with what practical reason dictates? Recall, however, that this move is not available to Johnston, due to his holding a response-dependence theory. If we are to give this explanation, however, we are left merely dictating that we should have certain responses and endorse only these, without regard for the response itself, and have thus

lost the promising attribute of the whole enterprise: being able to ground morality in our sentiments.

The communicative process that is the extension of Johnston's theory relies heavily on the human capacity for empathy: as is clear from Johnston's framework, he seems committed to hold that all agents will empathise – and accordingly take the vulnerabilities of others into account in their conduct – once they have been made to see that their own demands to have their vulnerabilities taken into consideration are, in fact, equally valid to those posed by others. Empathy builds a relevant and necessary bridge between the practical reasoner and the subject. This places a lot of stress on our empathic capacities, since it implies that we hold the capacity to change our emotional responses – or at least the strength of these responses – after engaging in practical reasoning. However, psychological research on empathy strongly suggests that our empathic capacities, whilst almost surprisingly strong, also have crucial limitations (Hoffman 2000:197). In particular, we are disposed to empathise with people with whom we are familiar, whether this familiarity consists in bonds of family or friendship, similarity, or simply in sharing our immediate situation (2000:206). Further, we have a tendency for empathic over-arousal, “an involuntary process that occurs when an observer's empathic distress becomes so painful and intolerable that it is transformed into an intense feeling of personal distress, which may move the person out of the empathic mode entirely” (Hoffman 2000:198). The second of these lacks in our empathic capacities can be plausibly accounted for in Johnston's framework if we assume that these states are temporary states of exception in the subjects life: an agent failing to help out in a serious accident because of severe empathic over-arousal is not a serious problem to our moral theory, since we can plausibly state that it is only in this state of emergency that the agent has this “repellent” response. The problem of empathic over-arousal becomes bigger, however, when we consider cases of it that cannot be said to be states of exception.

Extreme poverty, famine and genocide are all examples of ongoing phenomena in the world that many subjects fail to have “adequate” responses to. This consideration is, of course, also related to our tendency to empathise with the familiar. This phenomenon plausibly explains, for example, why so many westerners were concerned with the recent natural disasters in Japan and in the United States, compared to the involvement one sees with, for example, drought in sub-Saharan African states.

One might here be tempted to suggest that these lacks in our empathic capacities do not pose a serious threat to the problem at hand, and to hold that our pointing out that these inhibit us from having the adequate responses to various states of affairs is itself an example of practical reasoning setting a correct standard of adequacy. Yet, we must here – again – recall that doing this would amount to abandoning our present account of moral value, since Johnston's response-dependence theory holds that moral values gain their validity by being grounded in our actual moral sentiments. An inability to have the relevant sentiment is thus clearly problematic for the project as a whole. This is not the place to offer a full response on Johnston's behalf; nor do I have such a response myself. I will, rather, conclude by sketching what I take to be the most plausible strategy for starting to form such a response. The line of defence I have in mind would contain a story about how we engage with the evidence of these crucial limitations in our empathic capacities. If such a story could give a plausible account of how we, once (and if) this evidence has entered our collective moral discourse, gradually start including our awareness of this into our practical reasoning, then we could hope that our subjects – equally gradually – will start having the responses “we want them to”. This solution would, at least, sit well with Johnston, who asks that we always think of our present system of substantive reasonableness on the model of Neurath's ship: “not only may the ship require considerable overhaul, but so also may our methods of overhauling it” (1989:164).

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