RAFAEL DE CLERCQ

TWO CONCEPTIONS OF RESPONSE-DEPENDENCE

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ABSTRACT. The traditional conception of response-dependence is inadequate because it cannot account for all intuitive cases of response-dependence. In particular, it is unable to account for the response-dependence of (aesthetic, moral, epistemic . . . ) values. I therefore propose to supplement the traditional conception with an alternative one. My claim is that only a combination of the two conceptions is able to account for all intuitive cases of response-dependence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of response-dependence enables one to capture the core idea behind the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. However, unlike that distinction, it is applicable to properties of any sort, not just perceptual ones. Values, for instance, are often said to be response-dependent, although they are not straightforwardly perceivable.

In this paper I argue that the traditional conception of response-dependence is inadequate because it cannot account for all intuitive cases of response-dependence. In particular, I shall argue that it is unable to account for the response-dependence of (aesthetic, moral, epistemic . . . ) values. I therefore propose to supplement the traditional conception with an alternative conception, which I develop in sections 3 and 4 of my paper. My claim is that only a combination of the two conceptions is able to account for all intuitive cases of response-dependence.

The prospect of not finding a unitary account of response-dependence might not seem attractive. However, it is as yet unclear to me whether the two accounts have to be combined, or whether the alternative account is strong enough to replace the traditional one. In what follows, I shall only argue for the weaker claim that the traditional account requires supplementation. (Moreover,
it remains to be shown that in applying the concept of response-dependence to different cases we are guided by a single intuition. Maybe we have two different sorts of intuitions – one for each conception – that have been grouped together artificially by the term ‘response-dependence’.

One more preliminary point. In what follows, I shall refer to response-dependent properties and not to response-dependent concepts, although response-dependence is sometimes considered to be a characteristic of concepts in the first place (cf. Johnston, 1989; Holton, 1991; Pettit, 1991). At least in some contexts, the difference between the two approaches does not seem to matter, and indeed I think that much of what I have to say here still applies when the necessary substitutions are made. The only context (I can think of) in which the difference does matter is one in which the choice for the ‘response-dependent concept’ idiom is inspired by the belief that all properties are (in the end) primary qualities. ¹ For those committed to such a view, only my diagnosis of the problem may be acceptable, but not the remedy (they may skip sections 3 and 4 of this paper).

2. THE TRADITIONAL CONCEPTION

The conception of response-dependence that I call ‘traditional’ was developed in tandem by Mark Johnston (1989, 1993) and Crispin Wright (1988, 1993, 1994), although the basic idea was already present in, for instance, David Hume’s essay on the Standard of Taste. According to Wright, a property P is response-dependent if something of the following form is true:

\[ X \text{ is } P \text{ if and only if for any subject } S: \text{ if conditions } C \text{ obtain, then } S \text{ judges that } X \text{ is } P. \]

However, at least two more requirements have to be met if the property designated by ‘P’ is to count as genuinely response-dependent. First, it is required that the biconditional can be known to be true \textit{a priori} (i.e. roughly, without relying on sensory contents of a particular sort). Second, it is also required that the conditions C, mentioned on the right hand side, can be specified in a \textit{substantial} way, i.e., in such a way that nothing about the extension of