

Are Moral Qualities Response-dependent?

TERENCE CUNEO

Seattle Pacific University

Some fifteen years ago, John McDowell suggested that moral realists ought to exploit the analogy between moral qualities and secondary qualities. Rather than think of moral qualities as "brutely there" without any "internal relation to some exercise of human sensibility", McDowell proposed that moral realists should claim that moral qualities are *dispositions* of a sort—dispositions to elicit merited responses in appropriate agents.¹ In the intervening years, McDowell's suggestion has been widely discussed and criticized.² My aim in this essay is to consider afresh the claim that moral qualities are secondary qualities—or as I shall call them, "response-dependent qualities".³ I will argue that some of the more prominent objections to this position are inconclusive, but that there are other good reasons for rejecting it. If the overall argument of this essay is correct, then we shall have further grounds for thinking that the moral realist ought to defend what I will call a "primary" account of moral qualities.

I. Response-dependent Moral Qualities

According to the traditional Lockean view, to say that something is a response-dependent property is to say (roughly) that that thing's instantiation in an object consists in the disposition of that object to give rise to certain kinds of response in certain types of agent in certain types of circumstance.⁴ Colors, sounds, smells, and tastes are, on the traditional view, paradigmatic examples of response-dependent properties. A response-dependent account of colors, for example, says that something instantiates redness, because, and only because, that thing is disposed to look red to agents like us in suitable conditions. When applied to moral qualities, the response-dependent account tells us that

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X instantiates a **moral property** because, and only because, X is disposed to give rise to subjective states E in suitable subjects S in suitable conditions C.

This thesis is what I shall call the "basic claim" of the response-dependent view of moral qualities. It is worth pausing to consider it in more detail.

First, I assume that (at the very least) the basic claim purports to be an *elucidation* of what it is for something to be an instance of a moral property-or as I shall hereafter say, a *moral quality*.⁵ That is, I will assume that (at the very least) the basic claim endeavors to offer us a particularly informative account of the *nature* of moral qualities. Accordingly, if a particular formulation of the basic claim is insufficiently revelatory of the nature of a given moral quality, I will assume that that fact counts against its being an adequate formulation.

Second, I shall assume that the basic claim is not supposed to express a contingent empirical generalization, but is supposed to be necessarily true. In what follows, I will remain agnostic about whether the necessity in question is broadly logical, metaphysical, conceptual, or the like.⁶ I will, furthermore, remain neutral concerning the epistemological question of whether the basic claim is known *a priori* or *a posteriori*.⁷

Third, I assume that the basic claim is compatible with the view that moral qualities are *identical* with dispositions to elicit appropriate responses or *supervene* on such dispositions.⁸ I assume this because both the identity and the supervenience views are consistent with what is essential to the response- dependent position, namely, the explanatory thesis that entities instantiate moral properties *in virtue of*, and only in virtue of, the fact that they give rise to appropriate responses in suitable agents.

Fourth, I assume that the basic claim should be read to say that moral qualities are either identical with, or supervene on, what might be called *Lockean dispositions*. And let's say that something instantiates a Lockean dispositional property p just in case it has some property Q-or "categorical base"-which has the causal role of generating the appropriate experiences in suitable agents. So, for example, if we assume that *being nauseating* is a Lockean dispositional property, then an object is nauseating if and only if that object has some property p which has the causal role of generating feelings of nausea in suitable agents. It is common for philosophers to identify a Lockean disposition with the second-order property of *having a property which plays a certain causal role*. On this view, the property of *being nauseating* is identical with the property of *having the property of generating nausea in suitable agents*. For simplicity's sake, I will assume that this account of dispositions is correct, though nothing in my argument will rest upon this assumption.

Fifth, I assume that there are any number of ways in which the response- dependent theorist might understand the basic claim's references to "subjective states", "suitable agents" and "suitable circumstances". The sort of subjective states to which moral qualities give rise, for example, might be

understood as motivational states (i.e., dispositions of the will), moral judgments or emotions of the appropriate kind.⁹ Likewise, one might maintain that suitable subjects are, as Mark Johnston suggests, "reasonable" agents, or perhaps, virtuous agents.¹⁰ Similarly, suitable conditions might be specified as states of "increasing non-evaluative information",¹¹ or vivid presentation of one or another natural fact. I shall have more to say about the specific sorts of response-dependent views I have in mind later.

Finally, in what follows, I shall presume that the basic claim purports to offer a robustly nonnative, non-reductionist account of moral qualities. That is to say, I assume that advocates of the view do not wish either to analyze the concept of a moral quality in non-nonnative, non-evaluative, 'naturalistic' terms, or identify moral qualities with non-nonnative, non-evaluative, naturalistic qualities. In the same spirit, I shall also assume that the response-dependent theorist will not claim that the reference to "suitable" in the locution "suitable subjects" refers to some merely descriptive property such as statistical nonnality. I am well aware that one might defend a version of the response-dependent view which aspires to be reductionistic; but on this occasion, I will not concern myself with these positions.¹²

II. Competitors and Motivations

Before us, then, is an initial characterization of some of the basic features of the response-dependent position. It is, to be sure, not a position which most theorists in the moral realist tradition have adopted. So, why have theorists such as McDowell and Johnston found this position attractive? And with what other moral realist positions is the response-dependent view supposed to contrast?

Let's consider the second question. I shall assume that the realist view with which the response-dependent account is supposed to contrast is one which says that moral qualities are "primary" qualities of a sort. Perhaps the best way initially to categorize the primary view of moral qualities is negatively. The primary view denies, on the one hand, that moral qualities are *conceiving-dependent qualities*. That is to say, the primary view denies that moral qualities are "projected" or "imposed" on a thing by virtue of some (non-divine) agent (or agents) having (or being disposed to have) propositional or non-propositional attitudes toward that thing under actual or counterfactual conditions. In this sense, moral properties are different from properties like *being a five dollar bill* or *being a piece of property* which are arguably imposed on entities by the attitudes of agents.¹³ On the other hand, the primary view denies that moral qualities are mere dispositions to elicit attitudes. Thus, the proponent of the primary view denies that moral qualities are a species of response-dependent quality. What the advocate of the primary view of moral qualities maintains, by contrast, is that moral properties are instantiated in actions, intentions, etc., and that their being instantiated in actions, intentions, etc., is not

constituted by our having (or being disposed to have) subjective attitudes or responses to those actions, intentions, etc.

We are now in a better position to see why theorists like McDowell have found the response-dependent position alluring. Here is McDowell in his own words:

(t)o press the analogy (between response-dependent qualities and values) is to stress that evaluative 'attitudes', or states of will, are like (say) colour experience in being unintelligible except as modifications of a sensibility like ours. The idea of value experience involves taking admiration, say, to represent its object as having a property which {although there in the object) is essentially subjective in much the same way as the property that an object is represented as having by an experience of redness-that is, understood adequately only in terms of the appropriate modification of human (or similar) sensibility. The disanalogy, now, is that a virtue (say) is conceived to be not merely such as to elicit the appropriate 'attitude' ...but rather such as to *merit* it.¹⁴

McDowell's thought, I judge, is that moral qualities can adequately be conceived of only in terms of the kinds of subjective response that those qualities merit. (An account like J. L. Mackie's which says that we typically assume that moral qualities are primary qualities badly distorts our ordinary notion of a moral quality.) To grasp the nature of an instance of kindness is to grasp it as a quality which *demand*s, is *worthy of* various sorts of appropriate emotional, desiderative, and actional response. If McDowell is right, the response-dependent view can make sense of this feature of moral qualities; the primary view, by contrast, cannot.

McDowell identifies a second reason for espousing the response-dependent account. Here is McDowell again:

For it seems impossible-at least on reflection-to take seriously the idea of some- thing that is like a primary quality in being simply *there*, independently of human sensibility, but is nevertheless intrinsically (not conditionally on contingencies about human sensibility) such as to elicit some 'attitude' or state of will from someone who becomes aware of it Shifting to a secondary-quality analogy renders irrelevant any worry about how something that is brutally *there* could nevertheless stand in an internal relation to some exercise of human sensibility. ¹⁵

Coming to the surface here is McDowell's conviction that any adequate account of moral qualities must be compatible with the fact that apprehension of those qualities is intrinsically connected with appropriate motivation. Or to put it somewhat differently, coming into view is McDowell's conviction that any adequate account of moral qualities must fit comfortably with *motivational internalism* of a certain sort. I take it to be clear that the version of motivational internalism that McDowell wishes to defend has two chief components.¹⁶ First, the view says that there is a necessary connection between a

person's accurately apprehending and judging (in a certain way) that something is morally required, wicked, kind, etc., and that person's being motivated to act appropriately. Second, the view maintains that moral judgments by themselves (i.e., without the aid of any desire that is a distinct entity from such judgments) motivate agents to act. Any failure of moral motivation is, on this view, a *cognitive* failure; it is a failure to apprehend moral reality aright. According to McDowell, the primary view of moral qualities cannot plausibly be combined with motivational internalism thus conceived. A response-dependent view, by contrast, fits comfortably with motivational internalism. not only does a response-dependent account fit comfortably with motivational internalism thus construed, the response-dependent account also offers us an *explanation* of the necessary connection that exists between moral judgment and moral motivation. On the response-dependent view, moral qualities *just are* the sorts of entity which, necessarily, when grasped (in a certain way) elicit appropriate motivational states in moral agents.

There is, however, a third motivation for espousing a response-dependent view which has been articulated by Mark Johnston. Johnston points out that the response-dependent view can preserve some of the deepest intuitions in the broadly Pragmatist tradition. More specifically, the response-dependent view can preserve the conviction that practically important features of reality cannot in principle outstrip our grasp of them. Since moral qualities are dispositions to elicit subjective responses in appropriate agents, it is impossible for something to be a moral quality and be such that it cannot be apprehended by appropriate agents. Moral qualities are *for us* insofar as they *existentially depend* on our subjective responses. So, moral values are not, as J. L. Mackie believed, queer Platonic entities hovering somewhere in a Platonic heaven, and in principle inaccessible to us. Rather, instances of moral values such as wickedness, kindness, and benevolence are not intelligible apart from, and existentially depend on the sorts of sensibilities that we (and beings like us) have in suitable conditions. The response-dependent view, we might say, avoids an "alienated" account of the moral value by *domesticating* value.