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REVISIONARY DISPOSITIONALISM AND PRACTICAL REASON

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines the metaphysically modest view that attributions of normative reasons can be made true in the absence of a response independent normative reality. The paper despairs in finding a satisfactory account of normative reasons in metaphysically modest terms.

KEY WORDS: practical reason, normative reasons, response dependence, dispositionalism, normative realism, metaphysical revision

1. DISPOSITIONALISM AND METAPHYSICAL MODESTY

According to the metaphysically modest dispositionalist about normative reasons, agents can have good reasons to act in some ways rather than others even if there is no such thing as an independent normative reality. On a metaphysically modest dispositionalist account, options do not provide agents with reasons for action just in virtue of being the options they are. Instead, options provide reasons, if at all, only in virtue of being appropriately responded to by agents in favourable circumstances. Thus, it has recently been argued that options provide normative reasons just in case they would be favourably responded to by fully informed agents who would converge on the same desires in a state of reflective equilibrium.¹

The substance of the modest aspect of metaphysically modest dispositionalism can be formulated more precisely as the denial of any claim to the existence of a response independent normative reality.² For the purposes of this paper, I shall understand the response independence of normative reasons as the claim that normative reasons obtain in virtue of the intrinsic nature of some given set of options, independently of which circumstances this given set of options would be favourably responded to by any given set of agents. For reasons which will soon become clear, I shall under-

¹ See e.g. Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1994), Chapter 5.

² For the notion of response dependence, see e.g. Mark Johnston, "Objectivity Refigured," in John Haldane and Crispin Wright (eds.) *Reality, Representation and Projection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 85–130.



stand options to include both the promotion of ends and responses to ends in different circumstances. Thus, there is an option to pursue the end of happiness, or to favour it in conditions of calm reflection, for example. Options themselves can be favourably responded to either by acting on them or by having beliefs or desires about them. Thus, the end of happiness can be either pursued, desired, or believed to be rational. I call the claim to response independence for normative reasons *normative realism*. There is a weaker sense in which normative realism does not entail that reasons are response independent. Normative reasons are reasons to pursue *ends*, where ends are definable as objects of possible desire, and therefore in terms of what agents can possibly respond to. In this sense normative realism is compatible with response dependence. This weaker form of response dependence should not be confused with the response dependence of normative reasons on agents' responses to options in favourable circumstances.

Although few discussions of dispositionalism are explicit about the distinction, the dispositionalist can offer her view either as an *analytical* or as a *revisionary* thesis.³ The analytical dispositionalist claims that the response dependence of normative reasons is a conceptual truth which can be read off from constitutive commitments implicit in common-sense ethical discourse.⁴ The plausibility of this claim will not be addressed here. The revisionary dispositionalist, by contrast, claims that normative reasons *should* be construed as response dependent regardless of the conceptual commitments embodied in common sense ethical discourse. The motivation behind revisionary dispositionalism is metaphysical caution. According to the revisionary dispositionalist, a response independent construal of normative reasons on which reason attributions are made true by a response independent normative reality is paramount to metaphysical extravagance and error. The only metaphysically respectable course for ethical discourse to take, therefore, is to reconstrue all response inde-

³ For one discussion alert to this distinction, see Bruce W. Brower, "Dispositionalist Ethical Realism," *Ethics* 103 (1993), pp. 221–249. Brower thinks common sense is either silent or undecided on the issue of response dependence. His dispositionalist account of ethical properties is therefore consistent with, although it does not entail, revisionary dispositionalism. Brower does not address the question to which the present paper is addressed, namely what explains the normative privilege of the dispositionalist's favourable circumstances. See also H. Lillehammer, "Analytical Dispositionalism and Practical Reason," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 2 (1999), pp. 117–133.

⁴ See e.g. Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," *Philosophical Review* 85 (1975), pp. 3–22; Smith, Chapter 5, and Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Chapters 5–6. Harman claims these are 'sober' logical truths. Smith and Jackson claim they are *a priori* analytic truths which can be read off from the platitudes which define moral discourse.

pendent attributions of normative reasons as response dependent, thereby providing these attributions with what I call *metaphysically modest* truth-conditions. These metaphysically modest truth conditions should meet two basic desiderata. First, they should give sense to the idea that there are, in J. L. Mackie's sense, objectively prescriptive facts about which ends agents have reasons to pursue.⁵ In this, they do not differ from the allegedly extravagant facts postulated by the normative realist. Second, the dispositionalist's metaphysically modest truth conditions should deliver objective prescriptivity without a commitment to a response independent normative reality. In this respect, the truth conditions postulated by the metaphysically modest dispositionalist are less metaphysically extravagant than those postulated by the realist.

In this paper I examine the prospects for metaphysically modest revisionary dispositionalism about normative reasons. I shall argue that this view is unstable. The difficulty arises because the dispositionalist depends on the notion of a rationally privileged set of responses to ends which has the property of providing these ends with normative significance. I call such sets of responses *conditions of circumstance*. At the same time, the vindication of some condition of circumstance cannot consist in the idea that the circumstance in question is conducive to the endorsement of independently given rational ends, since this would entail a collapse into a metaphysically immodest realism. The question then arises how the reason conferring property of putative conditions of circumstances can be explained. I shall argue that the dispositionalist has no satisfactory answer to this question. The best explanation of the rational privilege of any condition of circumstance is one on which the circumstance in question is either conducive to the endorsement of response independent rational ends, or is itself intrinsically rational regardless of the circumstances in which *it* would be favourably responded to. If the former claim is true, dispositionalism is false. If the latter claim is true, dispositionalism is inconsistent with metaphysical modesty. Hence, the dispositionalist commitment to normative reasons appears to entail the denial of metaphysical modesty, and thereby the reintroduction of the metaphysical worries associated with the notion of a response independent normative reality.⁶ If the argument

⁵ See J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin, 1977), pp. 1–49. As I read Mackie, objective prescriptivity amounts to the existence of normative reasons which obtain unconditionally on the presupposition of any substantial end (desired or not) which is to be promoted. The correctness of this reading of Mackie does not matter here.

⁶ This claim should not be confused with Peter Vallentyne's view in "Response-Dependence, Rigidification, and Objectivity," *Erkenntnis* 44 (1996), pp. 101–112, that response dependent accounts which rigidify ideal responses across agents, times and

of this paper is sound, therefore, there are grounds to believe the truth of normative reason attributions entails a form of normative realism. Toward the end of the paper, I briefly consider the structure which such a view might take.

2. THREE NOTES OF METHODOLOGICAL CAUTION

A revisionary dispositionalist is not engaged in the modest task of providing an explanatory account of the commitments embodied in the common sense concept of normative reasons. A revisionary dispositionalist wants to make that concept metaphysically respectable. It follows that he can only respect the metaphysical commitments embedded in common sense ethical discourse to the extent that these commitments do not involve metaphysical error. Given his commitment to metaphysical modesty, he will therefore reject any part of common sense ethical discourse which is committed to the existence of a response independent normative reality. From this, it follows that a revisionary dispositionalist cannot without further ado appeal to the commitments embedded in common sense ethical discourse as evidence for a theory of normative reasons. After all, some of these commitments might be metaphysically unrespectable. He is thereby deprived of one ubiquitous philosophical tool, namely unqualified appeals to common sense intuition. Since the revisionary dispositionalist can only accept intuitions which are metaphysically respectable, he needs a story about what *makes* intuitions metaphysically respectable. Once this story is to hand, however, it will be clear that what makes an intuition qualify as evidentially relevant to the dispositionalist task is not merely a question of its intuitiveness, but rather a question of its metaphysical respectability. It might well turn out that intuitiveness *should* count as a mark of evidential relevance in the assessment of theories of normative reasons.⁷ But this is at best a point which has to be argued for, and one which cannot be antecedently taken for granted.

possible worlds will dispositionally pick out “the sort of objective moral attribute the realist believes in”, thereby failing to yield “ontological response dependence” (p. 109). On the view defended here, an account will fail to yield response dependence only if there is no non-trivial account of how responses determine the attribute in question, i.e. no account which does not presuppose the attribute in order to fix the appropriate response. On this definition, rigid response dependent accounts do not automatically qualify for realism, since rigidifying the determination relation does not automatically make that relation trivial in the required sense.

⁷ For a qualified defence of the evidential role of intuitions in ethics, see James Griffin, *Value Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chapter 1.

A second note of methodological caution relates to the dispositionalist construal of conditions of circumstance. We all have the intuition that there are circumstances in which we are better placed to make authoritative judgements about paradigm matters of fact, regardless of whether we actually grasp the truth about them in those circumstances. Your judgement that the chair is fragile, that Paris is neither in Texas nor France, or that water is H_2O , even if false, can still possess *epistemic* privilege, provided the judgements themselves are *rational*. For example, you may have reached your judgement by applying a generally reliable method which, although it does not guarantee truth, is generally truth preserving.⁸ By analogy, one might think normative reason attributions also attain epistemic privilege in virtue of obtaining in rationally privileged circumstances. A judgement that some end is rational might then be thought to confer rational privilege on ends judged to be rational provided the judgement is reached by applying a method understood to be generally reliable, such as the widely popular coherentist method of reflective equilibrium score-keeping. There is, however, an obvious danger in thinking of matters in these terms. For the metaphysically modest dispositionalist cannot admit the existence of a response independent normative reality to which responses to ends are reliably attuned. He cannot, therefore, argue his case by simply pointing to the existence of rational judgements about paradigm matters of fact. He is further obliged to show how the notion of rational privilege applies to cases where matters of fact are defined in terms of agents' responses in favourable circumstances, be they judgements, beliefs, actions or whatnot.

The second explanatory obligation feeds directly into a third. In spite of his rejection of response independently reason giving ends, it might be thought that the revisionary dispositionalist is entitled to take at least some substantial ends as given in the process of selecting appropriate conditions of circumstance. It is not obvious that he is. In this respect, normative reason attributions may be importantly different from other attributions for which one might want to give a revisionary dispositionalist account. Consider common sense talk about colour.⁹ Suppose you come to think that common sense colour attributions include a commitment to a response

⁸ For a discussion of the relation between epistemic justification and reliable methods of inquiry, see Alvin Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). For an application of epistemological constraints to ethics, see Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁹ For a critical discussion of dispositionalism about colour, see Paul A. Boghossian and David J. Velleman, "Colour as a Secondary Quality," *Mind* 98 (1989), pp. 81–103, and Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Chapter 4. Jackson goes on to offer a dispositionalist account of ethical claims in Chapters 5–6. For a discussion of the relation between secondary qualities and ethical properties,

independent realm of colour properties. Suppose you also think, on the basis of empirical evidence about the physical properties underlying our colour experiences, that there is nothing in the world corresponding to these common sense commitments. You might then be tempted to become a revisionary dispositionalist about colour. For even if there are no sufficiently unitary response independent properties underlying common sense colour attributions, there is nevertheless a significant amount of agreement about which colour objects seem to have in a large number of different circumstances. A revisionary dispositionalist about colour might therefore attempt to give truth conditions for colour attributions in terms of perceivers' responses to objects in some such set of circumstances. Maybe there is no principled obstacle to this. For in the case of colour, as in most cases for which a dispositionalist account may seem attractive, the attributions in question are contingently linked to the promotion of certain independently specifiable ends which can be invoked to select conditions of circumstance without begging any relevant questions. For example, it might be desirable for certain purposes that the accurate application of colour terms be widely available across a wide range of statistically normal perceivers, in spite of the possibility of selecting alternative, and less democratic, application conditions. A definition of application conditions for colour attributions in terms of the responses of the perceptually super-acute might fail to promote these social ends, and therefore be found lacking for the purposes in question. To this extent, the choice of colour conditions of circumstance is an unproblematically pragmatic issue. It is not clear that the choice of application criteria for normative reason judgments is unproblematically pragmatic in the same way. What distinguishes the case of normative reasons from other dispositionalist candidates is that what is in question in the choice of conditions of circumstance is also what the pragmatic approach assumes in order to select those conditions. The choice of conditions of circumstance is meant to determine which ends are legitimate to promote. Yet it may seem that the pragmatic approach can only be safely invoked to select conditions of circumstance for normative reason attributions if it is already assumed that certain ends are rationally legitimate to pursue. In the case of colour, the question of whether the ends which are to be served by colour classifications are rational ones is logically distinct from the question of how the extension of colour terms is determined. Nor need there be any requirement that colour conditions of circumstance themselves be rationally privileged. In the case of normative reasons, on the other hand, the question whether the ends which are

see John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities," in Ted Honderich (ed.), *Morality and Objectivity* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 110–129.

to be served by reason classifications are rational ones is not logically distinct from the question of how the extension of normative reason terms is determined. Furthermore, it is plausible that normative reason conditions of circumstance themselves must be rationally privileged. For as I argue below, it is unclear how they could otherwise confer reason giving force on the ends favoured by responses made in them. The revisionary dispositionalist about normative reasons is therefore faced with the explanatory burden of giving conditions of circumstance for normative reason attributions without implicitly assuming, for a certain set of ends, that these ends are rationally legitimate to pursue. In this, his predicament may differ not only from that of the revisionary dispositionalist about colour, but also from that of revisionary dispositionalists about most other kinds of attribution.

3. METAPHYSICALLY MODEST DISPOSITIONALISM AND RATIONAL PRIVILEGE

Any dispositionalist theory of normative reasons requires the definability of a set of circumstances in which agent's responses provide the ends favoured therein with the rational privilege necessary to give agents normative reasons to pursue them. This requirement plausibly entails that the circumstances of response which make the ends in question rational must themselves be rationally privileged. Otherwise, we would be unable to explain why it is not the case that agents' responses in any other set of circumstances equally confer rationality upon the ends favoured in those circumstances. If they did, there would be no more reason to pursue one end rather than any other, and consequently no normative reasons. The dispositionalist therefore needs an explanation of what makes one circumstance of response rationally privileged with respect to another. This is not to deny that it might be held (by certain Humeans for example) that some responses can confer rational privilege on ends without themselves being rationally privileged in any way. The argument of the present section amounts to an explicit rejection of this view.

On a metaphysically modest version of dispositionalism, the explanation of the rational privilege of conditions of circumstance should be consistent with its denial of response independent rational privilege for options. Consequently, the metaphysically modest dispositionalist cannot appeal to their endorsement of response independently rational ends as an explanation of the rational privilege of conditions of circumstance. From this it follows that metaphysical modesty not only rules out an explanation of rational privilege in terms of the endorsement of response

independently rational ends. It also rules out that certain circumstances of response are intrinsically rationally privileged just in virtue of being the circumstances of response they are. For favouring an end in a given circumstance is also an option, just like pursuing an end is. Now if some circumstances of response were intrinsically rationally privileged in virtue of the circumstances they are, then such circumstances of response would confer rationality upon ends, and thereby provide agents with normative reasons, independently of agents' responses to the circumstances in which these ends are favoured. In other words, the rational privilege of conditions of circumstance would be response independent. The rationality of ends would then also be at bottom response independent. For the rationality of ends would then ultimately derive from the rationality of conditions of circumstance, whose status as rational would be response independent. The dispositionalist who postulates intrinsic rational privilege for circumstances of response is thereby committed to the existence of a response independent normative reality.

Nor can the metaphysically modest dispositionalist plausibly explain the rational privilege of conditions of circumstance by claiming their rational privilege to be itself response dependent. Suppose it is. Then the rational privilege of some circumstance of response, *C*, derives from the fact that this circumstance of response (and thereby the ends favoured in it) would be favoured in some circumstance of response, *C**. This claim is only plausible if circumstance *C** is itself in some sense rationally privileged, since if it were not there would be no grounds to suppose it capable of conferring rational privilege on *C*. Then the question will arise about what explains the rational privilege of *C**. Again, the metaphysically modest dispositionalist is barred from assuming that *C** is itself intrinsically rationally privileged, since this would entail that *C** confers rational privilege on *C* (and on the ends favoured in *C*, in virtue of which agents have normative reasons to pursue them) independently of which circumstances agents would respond favourably to *C**. To attribute intrinsic rational privilege to *C** is therefore once more to endorse the existence of a response independent normative reality of intrinsically rational conditions of circumstance.

If the metaphysically modest dispositionalist were to postulate higher orders of rationality conferring conditions of circumstance *ad infinitum*, this would be of no use. At no point in the hierarchy of rationality conferring conditions of circumstance would it be explained how any condition of circumstance can have the property of conferring rational privilege on anything, be it ends or lower order conditions of circumstance, consistently with metaphysical modesty.

This apparently vicious regress of rationality conferring conditions of circumstance is not avoided by stipulating that $C = C^*$. If the rational privilege of C is in need of explanation, this need will remain even if C would issue in responses favourable to the rational privilege of C itself. If we are unsure about the rational privilege of responses in a state of full information, for example, we are unlikely to be put at ease by the fact that we would respond favourably to responses in a state of full information in a state of full information. For even though this claim is not entirely empty (not all circumstance of response need issue in favourable responses towards themselves), it remains dangerously circular. The capacity of responses in a state of full information to confer rational privilege on responses in a state of full information presupposes that some responses in a state of full information are rationally privileged. There are two different ways of reading the claim that a response in a state of full information can be endorsed in a state of full information. On the first reading, the state which issues in the endorsement is identical to the state being endorsed. On the second reading, the state which issues in endorsement is distinct from the state being endorsed, both states being states of full information. On the first reading, $C = C^*$, consequently threatening vicious circularity. On the second reading, Not [$C = C^*$], consequently threatening vicious regress. In either case, the rational privilege of a state of full information remains unexplained. Yet it is exactly such an explanation the dispositionalist needs in order to vindicate the claim that some ends provide agents with normative reasons in virtue of being favourably responded to in rationally privileged circumstances. The rational privilege of conditions of circumstance therefore looks inexplicable given the assumption of metaphysical modesty.

The metaphysically modest dispositionalist might claim that circumstances of response can be assigned rational privilege not by postulating that some options are response independently rational, but rather by regarding some options as rational for the sake of argument in a reflective process the outcome of which is the endorsement of certain circumstances of response as reason conferring. The set of options initially assumed to be rational might then be revised in light of the responses issued in the circumstance of response now understood to be rationally privileged. For example, one might think that ends are rational to the extent that they would be favoured after a process of rational deliberation. At the same time, there might be no way of determining what counts as a process of rational deliberation without deliberating on the assumption that certain determinate ends are rational. It does not follow that these assumptions could not be revised once a conception of rational deliberation has been

settled upon. By undertaking such a process, one might eventually come to renounce the rationality of the ends initially assumed to be rational. It is, however, unclear how the metaphysically modest dispositionalist could apply this strategy in his defence. In order for the strategy to be successful, it would have to be possible to arrive at a rationally privileged set of circumstances of response which confers rational privilege on the process of response revision. We have already seen that the metaphysically modest dispositionalist is unable to explain how any circumstance of response can possess this privilege. Consequently, one might suspect that the metaphysically modest dispositionalist has no way of explaining why the process of response revision should proceed in one way rather than another. If so, he cannot simply appeal to the possibility of taking options as rationally given for the sake of argument in order to explain the rational privilege of conditions of circumstance.

If the argument above undermines metaphysically modest dispositionalism in general, it undermines any particular version of it. For example, it undermines metaphysically modest theories which account for the truth of normative reason attributions in terms of agents' actual or counterfactual desires, such as desires one would have after having deliberated soundly, or desires one would have in a state of full information.¹⁰ It also undermines metaphysically modest theories which construe normative reasons in terms of the responses of a virtuous person, or the judgements of agents who are fully autonomous.¹¹ Any such theory might innocently claim that normative reasons are accountable for in terms of the responses of individuals or groups of individuals considered in their capacity as *rational*.¹² The problem sets in once the theory is shown to rely on the plausibility of explaining the existence of normative reasons in terms of dispositions of response the rational privilege of which is meant to obtain in the absence of a response independent normative reality. If the argument above is sound, we have no reasons to think there is any such privilege to be had.

The dispositionalist who wants to explain the rational privilege of conditions of circumstance is therefore faced with a dilemma. Either he postulates the existence of response independently privileged rational ends or conditions of circumstance, or he claims that all rationality conferring privilege is response dependent. If the former, he must renounce any claim

¹⁰ For the former, see e.g., Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101–113. For a combination of the former and the latter, see Smith, Chapter 5.

¹¹ For the former view, see John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62 (1979), pp. 331–350. For the latter view, see Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*.

¹² For this claim, see Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*.

to metaphysical modesty. If the latter, he must renounce any claim to explain the rational privilege of conditions of circumstance.

The only dispositionalist alternative consistent with metaphysical modesty seems to be that the rational privilege of conditions of circumstance is a primitive and inexplicable fact. But this reply is only likely to reignite the suspicion that the metaphysically modest dispositionalist is secretly committed to a response independent reality which dares not speak its name. While any theory must treat *some* notions as primitive, it matters crucially which notions they are. It would be no good to take the notion of intersubstantial interaction for granted in the explanation of how the mind can be separate from the body, for example. In the present case, the primitiveness of the notion of a rationally privileged circumstance of response undermines the metaphysically modest version of dispositionalism by making the rational privilege of conditions of circumstances (and, derivatively, of ends) a mysterious fact. Maybe we can live with this mystery. It would, however, be worrying for the metaphysically modest dispositionalist if the normative realist were able to provide an explanation of the rational privilege of conditions of circumstance. As it happens, the realist can provide such an explanation. As I shall argue in Section 5, the realist can say that what makes some circumstances of response rationally privileged is that they issue in the endorsement of response independently rational ends (or tend to issue in the endorsement of such ends, or tend to preserve the endorsement of such ends, or . . . These differences do not matter here). To the extent that this realist explanation is plausible, the fact that the metaphysically modest dispositionalist makes the rational privilege of conditions of circumstance inexplicable is evidence in favour of normative realism.

4. DOES THE PROBLEM GENERALISE?

The metaphysically modest dispositionalist might respond to the argument above by rejecting the claim that he is faced by a damaging regress or circularity problem merely in virtue of denying the existence of intrinsic response independent rational privilege for conditions of circumstance. More specifically, he might question whether the regress or circularity problem is a problem for the dispositionalist in particular, or whether it is a problem which, if faced by any account of normative reasons, is faced by all such accounts. One might suspect, for example, that an analogous regress or circularity argument could be given against the normative realist. Thus, where the dispositionalist fixes on a set of circumstances of response as reason conferring, the normative realist fixes directly on the set of

ends responded to. We might then ask the realist to explain the rational privilege of those ends. Suppose the prevention of torture is a response independently rational end. The dispositionalist may then ask how this end rather than any other can provide agents with reasons to promote it. The realist might then fix on some further property of that end as constituting a *reason conferring feature* of that end.¹³ For example, some ends should be promoted because they consist in the prevention of acts of gratuitous cruelty. Now the prevention of torture consists in the prevention of acts of gratuitous cruelty. So agents have reasons to promote the end of preventing torture. But now the dispositionalist might take his request for explanation one step further and ask in virtue of what this second putative reason conferring feature is a reason conferring feature, and the realist might seem to be faced with a regress or circularity problem. For the explanation of what makes something into a reason conferring feature of some end seems bound to either simply restate the existence of this reason conferring feature itself, or alternatively cite some new reason conferring feature which is meant to explain the reason conferring status of the original feature. If the former option is taken, the dispositionalist can object that the explanation is circular. If the latter option is taken, the dispositionalist can always raise the question of the reason conferring status of the newly cited feature, thereby launching the realist on a potentially infinite regress.¹⁴

The dispositionalist does not face a regress or circularity problem about reason conferring features at the level of ends themselves. For he explains the reason conferring status of ends in terms of agents' dispositions to endorse them in favourable circumstances. In this way, he can provide a straightforward account of what makes for the reason conferring status of rational ends without having to cite a potentially infinite number of reason conferring features. One might wish to draw two conclusions from this argument. First, if the realist faces a variant of the same problem of regress or circularity as the dispositionalist, this problem cannot be used to support one of these accounts against the other. Second, if the problem is faced by both accounts, one might suspect that it arises for any theory which entails the existence of normative reasons. In that case, it is not clear to what extent the problem of regress or circularity is really a problem at all, at least if we assume that there are normative reasons.

One might have doubts about the exact force of regress or circularity arguments, both in the metaphysics of ethics and elsewhere. While the legitimacy of such doubts might undermine the regress or circu-

¹³ For a discussion of reason conferring features, see Shelly Kagan, *Normative Ethics* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 17–22. Kagan calls these features *normative factors*.

¹⁴ I first heard this objection made by Jonathan Dancy.

larity argument as formulated above, it does not undermine the basic objection against metaphysically modest dispositionalism. This point is obscured by the fact that the dispositionalist response above ignores the distinctive feature of metaphysically modest dispositionalism which makes its inability to explain the source of normative privilege for conditions of circumstance a potential embarrassment. There is a significant difference between normative realism and metaphysically modest dispositionalism with respect to the response they can sensibly make to the demand for an explanation of the normative privilege they postulate for conditions of content and conditions of circumstance respectively. For the normative realist, it is clearly consistent to meet the question of what makes a reason conferring feature into a reason conferring feature with the blunt reply that it is intrinsic to the feature in question that it is a reason conferring feature. The possession of this property by certain ends, for example, may just be a primitive fact about them, a fact which obtains regardless of agents' responses to these ends in different circumstances. If the existence of this primitive fact is not amenable to further metaphysical explanation, this does not threaten to render the realist position any more metaphysically immodest than it already is, since the realist is already committed to a response independent normative reality and any metaphysical theory must take some facts as primitive. It is therefore possible for the realist to dismiss the charge of regress or circularity as based on an illegitimate explanatory demand. Now this approach is not compulsory. It is equally possible for the normative realist to accept the explanatory demand and explain the existence of reason conferring properties in terms of the existence of other, philosophically less controversial response independent properties. The basic point is rather that by refusing to meet this explanatory demand, the normative realist is not threatened with any further metaphysical immodesty than she is already lumbered with in virtue of being a normative realist.

The metaphysically modest dispositionalist cannot dismiss the explanatory demand in the same leisurely way. The claim that the rational privilege of favourable circumstances of response is just a primitive and inexplicable fact about them does not clearly distinguish the metaphysically modest notion of rational privileged conditions of circumstance from the realist notion on which this rational privilege is a response independent fact about them. On the contrary, the metaphysically modest dispositionalist rejection of response independence may easily seem somewhat at odds with the existence of a primitive property which some conditions of circumstance have of being reason conferring. If so, the metaphysical modesty apparently gained at the level of ends is once more threatened

at the level of conditions of circumstance. It follows that all accounts which admit the existence of normative reasons are not equally vulnerable to the regress or circularity argument. The normative realist can evade the argument at the outset by postulating the existence of intrinsically reason conferring ends (or conditions of circumstance). The metaphysically modest dispositionalist seems barred from postulating the existence of primitive reason conferring conditions of circumstance on pains of inconsistency.

5. TOWARDS NORMATIVE REALISM

If the foregoing considerations lead us to abandon metaphysical modesty in favour of a realist account of normative reasons, we shall be able to provide at least *some* explanation of the rational privilege of conditions of circumstance. First, conditions of circumstance can be rationally privileged in virtue of being conducive to the endorsement of response independently rational ends. Second, conditions of circumstance can be intrinsically rationally privileged in virtue of their nature as conditions of response of a certain kind. Third, conditions of circumstance can be rationally privileged in virtue of being endorsed (as such) in favourable circumstances which themselves are intrinsically rationally privileged in virtue of their nature as conditions of response of a certain kind. In each case, ends may provide agents with normative reasons the ultimate source of which is a response independent normative reality. In the first case, the realist postulates the existence of response independently rational ends. In the second and third case, the realist postulates the existence of response independently rational conditions of circumstance (of some order). In each case, the account of rational privilege amounts to the abandonment of metaphysical modesty.

Given the different ways which the realist has at his disposal to account for the existence of normative reasons, we can divide realist theories into two kinds, which we might call *pure* and *hybrid* realist theories, respectively. A pure realist theory postulates *either* response independently rational ends, *or* response independently rational conditions of circumstance (of some order) as the only source of normative reasons, but *not both*. A hybrid realist theory postulates *both* response independently rational ends *and* response independently rational conditions of circumstance (of some order) as the source of normative reasons. A pure realist theory which postulates response independently rational conditions of circumstance is a realist analogue of metaphysically modest dispositionalism. Since it entails the response independence of conditions of circumstance, this realist version of dispositionalism is not metaphysically

modest. It may, however, lay claim to other virtues of modesty associated with dispositionalist theories, such as the intelligible link they preserve between the ends agents have reasons to promote and the responses of agents in different circumstances. Thus, the wide-spread and *prima facie* plausible claim that ends favoured in conditions of full, or indefeasible, information are somehow normatively privileged can be consistently accommodated on this view.¹⁵

If response independently rational ends provide normative reasons in virtue of being the ends they are, ends provide reasons in virtue of their *intrinsic* properties as ends. They may also provide normative reasons in virtue of *some* of their *extrinsic* properties, provided their possession of these extrinsic properties is a matter of their relationship to other ends in relevant circumstances and not of their relationship to the responses of agents toward those ends (I ignore this complication in what follows). If response independently rational conditions of circumstance provide normative reasons, then ends necessarily provide reasons in virtue of their *extrinsic* properties, namely those properties they have in virtue of agents' dispositions to respond to them in favourable circumstances which themselves are rationally privileged either intrinsically or extrinsically (i.e. in virtue of themselves being endorsed by agents in favourable circumstances). On this definition, it seems to follow that the metaphysically modest dispositionalist is committed to deny that anything can provide normative reasons in virtue of its intrinsic properties, be it ends themselves or circumstances of response. For on this definition, the claim that an end or a condition of circumstance provides normative reasons in virtue of its intrinsic properties is paramount to the denial of metaphysical modesty with respect to the rational privilege of that end or condition of circumstance.

How to choose between a pure and a hybrid version of normative realism? One alternative is to measure their respective compatibility with independent desiderata for a theory of normative reasons. A pure version of normative realism is committed to construe normative reasons *either* in terms of response independently rational ends *or* response independently rational conditions of circumstance, but *not both*. If we take the former option, we can do justice to the *prima facie* plausible idea that rational privilege is intimately linked to the endorsement of response independently rational ends. Call this the *externalist* claim. As already noted, the cost of accepting the externalist claim is that it threatens to render obscure the relation between normative reasons and agents' deliberative circumstances. If we take the latter option, we can more easily do justice to the *prima facie*

¹⁵ See e.g. Smith, Chapter 5.

plausible idea that rational privilege is intimately linked to agents' deliberating circumstances and the upshots of rational reflection undertaken in them. Call this the *internalist* claim. The cost of accepting the internalist claim is that it threatens to render obscure the relation between normative reasons and response independently rational ends. Now a hybrid realist view can accommodate both the externalist and the internalist claim about rational privilege. First, conditions of circumstance can be rationally privileged in virtue of their relation to an agent's deliberating circumstances. But on a hybrid view, conditions of circumstance can also be rationally privileged in virtue of their relation to or the endorsement of response independently rational ends. Thus, if both conditions of circumstance and ends themselves are *sui generis* sources of normative reasons, there is no need to choose between the externalist and the internalist claims. On the assumption that there are no independent reasons to reject either the externalist or the internalist claim about rational privilege, their mutual compatibility on a hybrid version of normative realism might be regarded as an indirect argument in favour of that view.

The idea of a dual source of normative reasons in conditions of circumstance and ends themselves gives rise to further questions regarding the relationship between these differently grounded reasons. One central question relates to their criteria of individuation. Thus, if normative reasons are individuated with reference not only to their content, but also to their grounding, then a reason grounded in the intrinsic nature of ends will never be identical to a reason grounded in conditions of circumstance, even if the two reasons are reasons to do the same thing.

Another question relates to the mutual coherence and respective normative weights of normative reasons grounded in conditions of circumstance or conditions of content respectively. On this issue, the normative realist need not be committed to assert the absolute priority of one set of grounds over the other, nor the existence of a simple universal weighting principle. A brief survey of simple examples suggests that the priority might work out differently in different cases. Thus, it is *prima facie* plausible that conditions of circumstance win out in the case where a fully informed agent autonomously decides to break a minor promise. However, it is also *prima facie* plausible that conditions of content win out in the (admittedly extreme) case where the same fully informed agent autonomously decides to instigate a universal holocaust. Nevertheless, nothing of major significance for the plausibility of normative realism would follow if these *prima facie* judgements turned out to be false.

We have seen how the normative realist can account for the rational privilege of conditions of circumstance. It is hard to see how there could be

any better account for this privilege. In consequence, it is hard to see how there could be any better account of the existence of normative reasons. It is therefore arguable that we only have grounds to believe in the existence of normative reasons to the extent that we have grounds to believe in the existence of a response independent normative reality. The claim that there exists a response independent normative reality obviously remains to be vindicated.¹⁶ But this fact does not undermine the central contention of this paper, namely that *if* normative reasons exist, *then* normative realism provides a better account of their existence than does metaphysically modest dispositionalism. In fact, the present argument suggests that normative realism is the only plausible account of normative reasons, if such there be.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have argued that metaphysically modest revisionary dispositionalism is an unpromising account of normative reasons, on the ground that its metaphysical modesty renders it unable to explain the rational privilege of conditions of circumstance. It follows that dispositionalism about normative reasons is neither an intuitively compelling nor a metaphysically unproblematic position, contrary to what some of its recent propagators have seemed to suggest.¹⁷ On the contrary, its relations to both common sense intuition and metaphysical modesty are highly problematic. First, as a revisionary theory, dispositionalism can only accommodate those common sense intuitions which can be vindicated as metaphysically respectable. Second, the only version of dispositionalism which has any claim to be explanatorily adequate is inconsistent with metaphysical modesty. The only version of dispositionalism which has any claim to plausibility is no less counterintuitive or metaphysically problematic than the idea of a response independent normative reality.

¹⁶ The currently best developed attempt at such vindication is the coherentist strategy of embedding beliefs in the existence of a response independent normative reality within a comprehensive coherentist epistemology. For its clearest recent formulation, see David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁷ See Brower, *Dispositionalist Ethical Realism*; John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62 (1979), pp. 331–350; Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, and Mark Johnston, "Dispositionalist Theories of Value," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 63 (1989), pp. 139–174.

Many contemporary philosophers are apparently committed to a metaphysically modest view about normative reasons.¹⁸ I shall not go further into their reasons for favouring this view here. The challenge to these philosophers is this: either you give up your claim to metaphysical modesty or you give up your commitment to the existence of normative reasons, or both. Thus, if moral philosophy is to be done on a metaphysically sound basis, there are three options. First, develop a system of ethical thought known to imply metaphysical falsehood.¹⁹ Alternatively, seek to further vindicate the realist notion of a response independent normative reality.²⁰ For those attracted to neither option, there is also a third possibility: to seek an account of ethics which is not committed to the existence of normative reasons.²¹ This choice is better left for another occasion.²²

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¹⁸ See e.g., McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*; and Johnston, "Dispositionalist Theories of Value." See also David Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984); Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985); Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Smith, *The Moral Problem*.

¹⁹ For someone attracted to this strategy, see David J. Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

²⁰ For this strategy, see Brink.

²¹ Ethical non-cognitivism might be construed as a version of this strategy. The standard non-cognitivist circumvents the problem of vindicating the metaphysical commitments of ethical discourse by denying that these commitments exist. For this view, see e.g., Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

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