Defending "Restricted Particularism" from Jackson, Pettit & Smith*

Dan LÓPEZ DE SA

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ABSTRACT: According to Jackson, Pettit & Smith (2000), *"restricted particularism"* is not affected by their supervenience-based consideration against particularism but, they claim, suffer from a different difficulty, roughly that it would violate the platitude about moral argument that, in debating controversial moral issues, a central role is played by various similarity claims. I present a defense of "restricted particularism" from this objection, which accommodates the platitudinous character of the claim that ordinary participants in conversations concerning the evaluative are committed to descriptive similarities and differences being relevant in the way described by Jackson, Pettit and Smith, to moral similarities and differences. My defense exploits a presuppositional component congenial to response-dependent proposals such as Lewis's (1989).

Keywords: particularism, response-dependence, restricted particularism, values.

Particularism has generated a great amount of literature during the last years. Part of the discussion is about which is exactly the specific content of the particularist's claim. In a recent paper, 'Ethical Particularism and Patterns,' Frank Jackson, Phillip Pettit and Michael Smith (2000) claim that particularism can be generally conceived as the view according to which the evaluative is "shapeless" with respect to the descriptive: there is no descriptive pattern unifying the class of items of a given evaluative kind.

Particularists so characterized —like almost everyone nowadays— commit themselves to a certain global supervenience claim: (roughly) descriptively identical worlds are evaluatively identical. Jackson, Pettit & Smith argue that, although this supervenience claim is in itself compatible with particularism, considerations that take off from it provide an argument against the view. In section 1 I will summarize these considerations: there seems to be no way in which supervenience can be respected without the kind of patterned connections between the descriptive and the evaluative that particularists deny.

If these considerations are sound —as I'm inclined to think they are— commitment to supervenience (and avoidance of a *sui generis* character of the evaluative) guarantee there should be (in principle knowable) descriptive patterns unifying the instances of evaluative kinds, and hence the rejection of particularism, as characterized. Recent debates about the response-dependence of colors or the comic, however, may suggest a view according to which those descriptive patterns essentially involve certain responses of subjects like us, compatibly with there being no such patterns *in the*

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(evaluated) things themselves, as it were. This is what Jackson, Pettit & Smith label "*restricted particularism*" (2000, p. 93): according to it, there *are* principles running from and to the descriptive and the evaluative, and the evaluative is not shapeless with respect to the descriptive —although its shape can only be discerned when one steps back and see its effects on us.

"Restricted particularism" is thus strictly speaking *not* a version of particularism, as characterized. Why label it 'restricted particularism' at all? According to Jackson, Pettit & Smith, "restricted particularism is, at the bottom, the view of many who call themselves particularists" (2000, p. 93). The extent to which this is so, and whether this would indeed vindicate the appropriateness of the label, is something with respect to which I do not need to take a stance. In this paper, I want to defend the view *they* call 'restricted particularism' from the consideration they offer against it. Hence I will stick to the cautious quotes in referring to "restricted particularism," as to avoid any commitments to whether my response, if sound, will be available to or incompatible with the main tenets of those who called themselves 'particularists.'[1]

As just alluded to, Jackson, Pettit & Smith think that "restricted particularism", although immune to their supervenience-based argument against full-blown particularism, suffers from *another* difficulty, which I will explain in section 3: it "would violate the platitude about moral argument that, in debating controversial moral issues, a central role is played by various similarity claims, claims of the form 'Given you say that about this case, the onus is on you to explain why you do not say the same about this other similar case,' where it is often clear that the similarities in question are descriptive ones *in the acts themselves* as opposed to similarities in the response-dependent role they play" (2000, pp. 93-4).

My defense of "restricted particularism" will be in the final section 4. I will *not* deny the platitudinous character of the claim that ordinary participants in conversations concerning the evaluative are committed to descriptive similarities and differences being relevant to moral similarities and differences, in the way described by Jackson, Pettit and Smith. But I will argue that acknowledgment of this is *compatible* with restricted particularism, contrary to what they state. Hence, their consideration against "restricted particularism" is not sound in general. In order to argue for this, I will offer an indirect route which will exploit the pragmatic component that the "restricted particularist" proposal should, in my view, include, concerning the relevant (actual and counterfactual) similarities between the speaker and the addressee.

1. Jackson, Pettit & Smith against Particularism

Jackson, Pettit & Smith claim that particularism, if it is to be an interesting and distinctive view, can be characterized as the view according to which the evaluative is "shapeless" with respect to the descriptive: there is no descriptive pattern unifying the class of items of a given evaluative kind. As such it is to be contrasted with more traditional forms of *principle-ism*, having it that there *is* such a unifying descriptive pattern

[1] I am indebted here to two anonymous referees for this Journal.

—be this known (as some utilitarians would think), or unknown but knowable in principle, if not in practice.

As I said at the beginning, Jackson, Pettit & Smith hold that particularism so conceived can be put into tension with the global supervenience claim that particularists aim to respect: (roughly) descriptively identical worlds are evaluatively identical. Their argument can be summarized as follows. If the global supervenience claim is true then the way a world is evaluatively cannot vary independently of the way a world is descriptively: a complete specification of the way a world is descriptively would fix a complete specification of the way a world is evaluatively. In particular, a complete specification of the way a world is descriptively would fix whether a given particular *X* is, say, right. Therefore the global supervenience claim entails that there are necessary conditionals of the form (where each D_i stands for a complete specification of the way a world is descriptively)

If D_1 then *X* is right
If D_2 then *X* is right
…

Now is there any pattern that unifies all the D_i's such that 'if D_i then *X* is right' is true? The global supervenience claim, by itself, does not require that there be: in so far as supervenience is concerned, the grouping of the relevant D_i's may be entirely random. So there seems to be four alternatives: either (i) there is no pattern; or (ii) there is a pattern, but is uncodifiable; or (ii) there is a pattern, but is descriptively uncodifiable; or (iv) there is a descriptively codifiable pattern. Principle-ism certainly holds (iv). But according to Jackson, Pettit and Smith each of (i), (ii) and (iii) have consequences that put particularism in big trouble. (i) faces the following "semantic" difficulty: it makes hard to account for the possibility of *grasping* 'is right.' In their words:

> We use words to mark divisions. Tables are different from chairs, and we mark this by using different words for them. In the same way, wrong acts are different form right ones… What, then, marks off the acts we use 'right' for from the acts we use 'wrong' for? Or, equivalently, what do the right ones have in common that the wrong ones lack? … Grasp of the predicate 'is right' simply consists in a grasp of the various D_i which constitute that set. But this cannot be *all* that unites the class of right actions. There must be some commonality in the sense of a pattern that allows projection from some sufficiently large subset of the D_i to new members. If there isn't, we finite creatures could not have grasped through a finite learning process (the only sort there is) the predicate 'is right.' So there must be a pattern of commonality —in the weak sense operative in this paper of that which enables projection— uniting the sent of right acts. (2000, pp. 86-7)

If this is sound, it will certainly apply to (ii) as well:

> But unknowable patterns present similar problems to non-existent ones. We noted earlier that if the connection between the descriptive ways things are and the moral ways thins are is a random one, the it is impossible to see how we could have come to grasp moral concepts by exposure to, or reflection on, a finite number of cases. The same is true if, *as far as we can tell*, the connection is a random one. (2000, p. 89, emphasis in the original)

To the extent the particularist holds the global supervenience claim, it seems, she will have to be committed to (iii). But according to Jackson, Pettit and Smith, then the problem is then the following:

> If this is the particularists' view, however, then we think that they can fairly be accused of false advertising. Under examination the new and exciting thesis that there are no moral principles collapses into the jejune doctrine advanced by Moore at the turn of the century: moral properties are *sui generis*, and hence not to be found among the descriptive. (2000, p. 88)

I am inclined to think this argument is sound, and hence to endorse the conclusion: commitment to supervenience and avoidance of a *sui generis* character of the evaluative guarantee that there should be (in principle knowable) descriptive patterns unifying evaluative kinds, and hence, given that I grant the assumptions, to reject particularism as characterized. It is important to notice that even if that turns out not to be grounded, this would not affect the purposes of this paper.

2. "Restricted Particularism"

After having completed the argument I have summarized in the previous section, Jackson, Pettit & Smith observe that consideration to the recent debate about colors or the comic may suggest a specific view on behalf, perhaps, if not of the letter of the particularist claim, maybe at least part of the spirit: the view according to which those descriptive patterns essentially involve certain responses of subjects like us, compatibly with there being not such patterns *in the (evaluated) things themselves*, as it were. As I said in the introduction, this is what Jackson, Pettit & Smith label *'restricted particularism'*:

> We might call the view that there is no descriptive pattern in the right actions themselves *restricted* particularism. It holds that all that unifies the right (and, for that matter, the good, the bad, and so on) lies in something about our responses. This can be given descriptively, and so, in one perfectly good sense, there are principles, so called, running to and from the descriptive and the moral, and the moral is not shapeless with respect to the descriptive. However, on this view, its shape can only be discerned when you step back and see its effects on us. Obviously, restricted particularism is a substantial retreat on what some particularists want to say —the moral is shaped, albeit its shape comes from our responses— but we hazard, all the same, that restricted particularism is, at bottom, the view of many who call themselves particularists. (2000, pp. 92-3)

The best way I know of elaborating on the content of "restricted particularism" is by reference to recent debates on response-dependence, to which Jackson, Pettit, & Smith also refer. The notion of response-dependence was introduced by Mark Johnston (1989) trying to generalize the notion of a secondary quality, by applying also to values in a way that —at least a qualified form of— evaluative realism was vindicated. His original characterization of it could be stated as follows. Let me say then that if F is a (predicative) concept, a *response-dependence-giving biconditional* for F (*rd biconditional*, for short) is a substantial biconditional of the form:

> x is F iff x has the disposition to produce in subjects S the mental response R under conditions C

or the form

> x is F iff subjects S have the disposition to issue the x-directed mental response R under conditions C

where 'is F' is a predicate expressing F, and 'substantial' is there to avoid "whatever-it-takes" specifications of either S, R or C. (One such "whatever-it-takes" specification

of, say, subjects *S* would be "those subjects, however they be, such that something is disposed to produce in them responses *R* under conditions *C* iff it is *F*." *Mutatis mutandis* for the responses and the conditions.) Johnston's proposal was then that a (predicative) *concept* is response-dependent iff there is a response-dependence-giving biconditional for it which holds *a priori*.

Several philosophers[2] have recently provided arguments that in my view compellingly show that the original characterization of response-dependent concepts by Johnston just considered does not succeed with respect to his original, metaphysical, project, i.e. of appropriately generalizing the notion of a secondary quality. The main element can be put straightforwardly: there are also rd biconditionals for concepts for —what we reasonably take to be— *primary* qualities which hold a priori. Or more generally, there are concepts that are response-dependent, in this sense, independently of whether they signify primary, fully objective, properties. Therefore, at least insofar as the original project for which response-dependence was introduced is to be pursued, the characterization of the notion should be modified. The one I favor, elaborated by García-Carpintero (2007) and Wedgwood (1998), dwells upon the ideas of Kit Fine concerning the notion of essence. A *property P* is response-dependent iff there is an rd biconditional for a concept signifying it which holds in virtue of the nature of *P*.

But now a crucial distinction need be drawn, in terms of whether rigid specifications of the subjects are allowed in the relevant rd biconditionals. Let me begin by saying that a specification of the subjects in an rd biconditional is rigid iff the relevant predicate involved in the specification is rigid.[3] So take for instance 'human who fails no discrimination test passed by other human subjects.' This is not, as it stands, a rigid specification. For take the relevant predicate 'is a human who fails no discrimination test passed by other human subjects' and suppose that in the actual world, it is true (even if knowable only *a posteriori*) that being a human who fails no discrimination test passed by other human subjects is being a human with a perceptual apparatus meeting condition ABC. Now consider a counterfactual situation in which, due to whatever reason you might think of, humans who fail no discrimination test passed by other human subjects are those with a perceptual apparatus meeting condition DEF. Now intuitively, it is this other property of being a human with a perceptual apparatus meeting condition DEF which would be relevant for evaluating sentences containing 'is a human who fails no discrimination test passed by other human subjects' with respect to this other world. But then 'is a human who fails no discrimination test passed by other human subjects' is not a rigid predicate. Its relevant rigidification, which can be

[2] Including Manuel García-Carpintero (2007), Jussi Haukioja (2000), Frank Jackson (1998, Jackson & Pettit 2002), Philip Pettit (1998, Jackson & Pettit 2002), and Ralph Wedgwood (1998).

[3] I am assuming, with Kripke, and a lot of people in discussions on philosophy of mind, philosophy of science or metaethics, that the notion of rigidity might be extended to be applicable to predicates, roughly along the lines of: a predicate is rigid iff it signifies the same property in all relevant worlds. Proposals like this have recently received criticisms, among which: that it assumes that signification can hold between predicates and properties, that it would overgeneralize, making all predicates trivially rigid, and that in any case it would count as rigid predicates some that do not signify natural properties/kinds. I try to respond to these criticisms in López de Sa 2008a and López de Sa forthcoming.

put as something like 'is actually a human who fail no discrimination test passed by other human subjects' leads nonetheless to a rigid specification of the subjects, of the sort of 'humans who fail no discrimination test passed by other human subjects, as they actually are.' Let me say that a rd biconditional is *rigid* iff it involves a rigid specification of the subjects, and that it is *flexible* otherwise. Now, and this is the distinction, given a response-dependent property, it is a *rigid* response-dependent property iff the rd biconditionals for concepts signifying it which hold in virtue of its nature are rigid; and it is a *flexible* response-dependent property iff there is a rd biconditional for a concept signifying it, holding in virtue of its nature, which is flexible.

Rigid response-dependent properties are just dispositions to raise certain responses in certain (rigidly specified) subjects under certain conditions, and as such they arguably supervene (locally) on the intrinsic nature of their instantiations. A posteriori considerations seem to support the view that colors are response-dependent properties in this rigid sense. By contrast, *flexible* response-dependent properties have, so to say, flexible essences which track the relevant responses whatever the subjects are like, and hence, there arguably be nothing in their various actual and counterfactual instantiations that unifies them besides the fact that they are suitably related to the subjects, whatever they are like in the various situations. I will understand that "restricted particularism" amounts to the claim that evaluative properties are *flexible* response-dependent properties.[4]

One such proposal, useful for the sake of illustration, but which will also play a substantive role in my defense of "restricted particularism," is that of David Lewis in his 'Dispositional Theories of Value' (1989). The view is that the following holds *apriori* and in virtue of the essence of being good:

(L) x is good iff we are disposed to value x under appropriately reflective conditions;

where *valuing* is the favorable attitude of desiring to desire, and 'we' refers to a population consisting of the speaker and those relevantly like him, and to be *relevantly* like a given subject is to be disposed, with respect to valuing *the relevant thing in question* in the relevant conditions, *exactly* how the subject is. It is important to stress that, so understood, 'we' turns out to be a *flexible* characterization of a group of subjects. It 'is relevantly like me' actually picks out the property of being relevantly the way I am *actually*. But I could be otherwise, and in particular my disposition to value could be very different from what it actually is. But then, with respect to those worlds in which I am suitably different, 'is relevantly like me' will signify the property of being relevantly the way I *would be* in those situations. Given this, the proposal is one according to which evaluative properties are *flexible* response-dependent properties, and hence a version of "restricted particularism."

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[4] In my view, a qualified realism is indeed vindicated with respect to *rigid* response-dependent properties, but not with respect to *flexible* response-dependent properties —hence response-dependence in the unqualified sense ultimately fails with respect to the project for which it was introduced. Concerning this, and for elaboration on the content of the preceding paragraphs, see López de Sa 2003 and López de Sa MS.

(What is this view true? I *do* strongly believe that it is —once the pragmatic element to be considered below. But that belief of mine will play no role in this paper.)

3. Jackson, Pettit & Smith against "Restricted Particularism"

Jackson, Pettit & Smith acknowledge that "restricted particularism" is not affected by their considerations against particularism summarized in section 1. According to them, though, it suffers for another difficulty:

> ["Restricted particularism"] would violate the platitude about moral argument that, in debating controversial moral issues, a central role is played by various similarity claims, claims of the form 'Given you say that about this case, the onus is on you to explain why you do not say the same about this other similar case,' where it is often clear that the similarities in question are descriptive ones *in the acts themselves* as opposed to similarities in the response-dependent role they play. (2000, pp. 93-4)

And that is so for, as emphasized above, "restricted particularism" is, by characterization, compatible with there being no descriptive pattern unifying the instances of a given evaluative kind besides that essentially involving the relevant responses of (flexible specified) subjects.

As I said in the introduction, I will not deny the platitudinous character of the claim that ordinary participants in conversations concerning the evaluative are committed to descriptive similarities and differences being relevant in the way described by Jackson, Pettit and Smith, to moral similarities and differences. That will be, in my view, a desperate and unmotivated move. Rather, I will claim, *via* an indirect route, that acknowledgment of this is, contrary to what they state, compatible with "restricted particularism," and hence that their general argument is not sound. In particular I will argue that the particular "restricted particularist" proposal of Lewis, sketched in section 2, can indeed account for such a platitude, once a pragmatic component of the proposal is made explicit, which is independently motivated by a different, even if related, worry concerning relativism that some have urged against proposals of this sort.

4. The Pragmatics of Conversations Concerning the Evaluative

Given that our dispositions to value something are (in each particular case) contingent, the Lewisian proposal seems to entail at least a certain form of relativism concerning the evaluative, arguably a form of "indexical relativism."[5] But relativism of this sort, it is often said, contradicts a still more basic platitude regarding conversations concerning the evaluative: ordinary participants are committed to regard utterances of 'that is good' and 'that is not good' as (literally) contradicting each other. Here is Wright's:

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[5] Some may have doubts about these relativistic consequences being consistent with the views of many who called themselves 'particularists.' As I said in the introduction, I am using scare quotes when referring to "restricted particularism" as a way of discussing the position I am interested in independently of the views of many who called themselves 'particularists.'

> If [Indexical Relativism] were right, there would be an analogy between disputes of inclinations and the 'dispute' between one who says 'I am tired' and her companion who replies, 'Well, I am not' (when what is at issue is one more museum visit). There are the materials here, perhaps, for a (further) disagreement but no disagreement has yet been expressed. But ordinary understanding already hears a disagreement between one who asserts that hurt-free infidelity is acceptable and one who asserts that it is not. (Wright 2001, p. 51)

Again, I don't want to deny there *is* disagreement when people ordinarily engage in discussions about evaluative issues. That is to say, I will take the following for granted:

(•) In any ordinary non-defective conversation it is common knowledge among the participants that utterances of (say) 'that is good' and 'that is not good' would contradict each other.

What I would like to resist is the idea that the Lewisian proposal, with the relativism concerning the evaluative it entails, is incompatible with (•).

Remember that the Lewisian account of values had it that the following holds (*a priori* and) in virtue of the nature of being good:

(L) x is good iff we are disposed to value x under appropriately reflective conditions.

That entails the following, truth-conditional, component:

(TC) Utterances of 'is good' in ordinary non-defective contexts contribute to the truth-condition of simple sentence-token in which they occur (with respect to a world) the property of being such that people relevantly like the speaker of the utterance (whatever she is like) are disposed to value it under appropriate reflective conditions.

What I propose now is make explicit a second element of the proposal, concerning not the truth conditional import of utterances of 'is good' but rather the presupposition it triggers, which I propose to state thus:

(P) 'is good' triggers the presupposition that the addressees are relevantly like the speaker both in actual and counterfactual situations.

(P) is indeed the element that in my view makes the theory clearly not objectionable on the bases of disagreement in that, in attention to it, it can be defended that it does not violate the main tenets of (•). But before going on to that, let me briefly recall some basic facts concerning the presuppositions I'll be presupposing below.

A participant of a conversation *presupposes* something if he takes it to be part of the common ground of the participants, that he is disposed to act, for the sake of the conversation, as if he believed it be true. The presuppositions of all participants of a given conversation determine the *context* of the conversation. A *non-defective* context occurs when all participants are indeed actually presupposing the same, and can be seen as the set of worlds in which the relevant presuppositions are indeed true. A context presupposes a proposition just if it entails it. Hence, a non-defective context is one that presupposes all and only the propositions its participants presuppose. And finally a given *expression* triggers a certain presupposition just if an utterance of it would be in-

felicitous in the context of a conversation if that context did not presuppose it (or participants *accommodate* it by coming to presuppose it on the basis of the fact that the utterance has been produced). (See Stalnaker 1978) It is in this sense that the second presuppositional element (P) concerning 'is good' is to be understood.

David Lewis does indeed anticipate the kind of move in defending relativism from the argument from disagreement I am offering here:

> If some relative version were the correct analysis, wouldn't that be manifest whenever people talk about value? Wouldn't you hear them saying 'value for me and my mates' or 'value for the likes of you'? Wouldn't you think they'd stop arguing after one speaker say X is a value and the other say it isn't? —Not necessarily. They might always presuppose, with more or less confidence (well-founded or otherwise), that whatever relativity there is won't matter in *this* conversation. (Lewis 1989, p. 84)

That is indeed the heart of the reason why attention to (P) shows how the proposal does not indeed contradict (•) and is not objectionable in the way the argument from disagreement against relativist presumes. Take any ordinary non-defective context, and suppose participants in the conversation come to dispute whether a certain particular action is good in a given situation, and consider a particular utterance by one of them of 'this action is good.' According to the proposal, that utterance has as its truth condition the state of affairs which consists in this action being such that a population including the speaker is disposed to value it under the relevant conditions, as (TC) requires, and presupposes that the participants in the conversation all belong to that population, as (P) has it. As the context is non-defective, all participants presuppose that, and hence, are disposed to behave for the sake of the current conversation taking it for granted. So if another rejects the considered assertion by uttering 'no, I don't think it is' the proposal has it that all participants are committed to view this second utterance as having as its truth-condition the failing to obtain of one and the same former state of affairs, namely, that in which this action is such that a population *which includes all participants* of the conversation has a certain feature concerning it. In short, all participants are committed to see both utterances as contradicting each other, as our former principle (•) established.

If that is so then the Lewisian account concerning values, when it is understood as containing the presuppositional component, can indeed accommodate the fact about disagreement contained in (•). But therefore the argument from disagreement against relativism in a given domain I have been considering is not successful.[6]

But now, coming back to Jackson, Pettit & Smith's argument against "restricted particularism," I think attention to (P) also shows why a "restricted particularist" proposal like the Lewisian one can indeed accommodate the platitude concerning the relevance of descriptive similarities and differences in the things themselves in evaluative conversations. And the reason concerns the previous considered one: any non-defective conversation will be such as to their participants being relevantly alike. But therefore *it follows* that descriptive similarities and differences in the things themselves will be, *in that conversation*, certainly relevant for the evaluative similarities and differ-

[6] For further elaboration and discussion, see López de Sa 2003 and 2008b.

ences at discussion: provided that a certain commonality among the valuers can be granted, quite stronger *local* dependencies are, in the relevant contexts, secured.

Finally, one could object that the content of the platitude was intended to be much richer than I have considered, and crucially not be restricted to what goes on in non-defective conversations. As I have argued elsewhere concerning the corresponding objection for the platitude in the case of disagreement,[7] however, I do not think that the *platitudinous* character is compatible with the unrestricted content. The unrestricted content —that *whenever* two subjects diverge in their judgments regarding (say) 'this is good,' *whatever* worlds they inhabit and *however* dissimilar they are in their dispositions to value, they will regard similarity in response-independent descriptive features as relevant for similarity in evaluative features— cannot be motivated just by appealing to our intuitions as revealed in our common conversations on the matter. And in my view something like this is what would be required in order for it to qualify as a *platitude* about discussions concerning evaluative issues. Of course, even if not a platitude, it could turn out to be *true* all the same. In one was in a position to argue that this is so, that would indeed perhaps contain the materials for an argument against "restricted particularism." But a different one —and of quite a different nature— from the one by Jackson, Pettit & Smith that I have discussed. (And, for what it is worth, I think one may be reasonably skeptical about any such argument being, anyway, forthcoming.)

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Dan López de Sa is an ICREA Researcher at LOGOS (Barcelona) and Associate Fellow at Arché (St Andrews). He is particularly interested in the view of vagueness as semantic indecision, the notion of rigidity for predicates, the relation between response-dependence and realism, the nature of values, debates in meta-metaphysics, and the characterization of the different forms of contextualism/relativism. He has published in *Analysis*, *Mind*, *Noûs*, *Philosophers' Imprint*, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, and *Synthèse*, among others.

Address: ICREA at LOGOS, Universitat de Barcelona, Montalegre 6, 08001 Barcelona. E-mail: dlds@st-andrews.ac.uk.