

Wittgenstein, Grammar and Response-Dependence

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Introduction Significant similarities can be found between Wittgenstein's views on grammar and response-dependence accounts of concept use and acquisition. Such similarities may be unsurprising since Phillip Pettit's response-dependence account of concept acquisition was first developed as a response to the rule-following conundrum (in its Kripkensteinian form). However, very little further work has been undertaken at the intersections of the literature of response-dependence and Wittgenstein's work. I want here to bring response-dependence into productive conversation with Wittgenstein's work: A consideration of key aspects of a response-dependence approach in the light of Wittgenstein's remarks on grammar and on the nature and role of hinge propositions adds perspicuity and plausibility to the response-dependence approach, while also showing that that approach fits comfortably within a Wittgensteinian framework.

I begin with a brief outline of the response-dependence approach. I continue by drawing on Wittgenstein's considerations of grammatical propositions showing how the response-dependence project might be re-framed as an exercise in drawing our attention to the grammar of certain of our concepts. Finally, I extend that idea, reflecting on remarks in *On Certainty*, to show propositions capturing the relationship between our secondary quality concepts and our perceptual responses are cases of 'hinge' propositions, propositions that are part of the framework upon which our web of belief depends. By the same token, understanding those concepts as response-dependent enables a clearer picture of why our colour attributions (for example) are semantically and epistemically secure, but also demonstrates that that certainty has its limits.

1. Response-Dependence In the tradition of conceptual analysis, the response-dependence project aims to provide an elucidation of what governs at least some of our practices of classification. Secondary quality and other concepts appear to exhibit a dependence upon subjects' responses – something is yellow just in case it looks yellow, bitter just in case it tastes bitter, and so on. Over the past two decades or so, theories of response-dependence have emerged as a strategy for determining more precisely the nature and status of this dependence, and its wider implications. These theories elucidate concepts by means of a biconditional claim known as a *basic equation*. Basic equations state an a priori dependence between a concept's extension and the response its instantiation tends to elicit in appropriate subjects under appropriate conditions, and they take the following form:

For any concept F and for any object X: X is F iff X is such as to elicit some typical response (R) in appropriate subjects (S) under appropriate conditions (C)

The relation made perspicuous by this biconditional has the effect of privileging responses that occur under certain conditions. This confers a certain epistemic infallibility on those responses: if conditions are appropriate, a subject cannot be wrong or ignorant about whether or not X is F.

The biconditional claim concerns the way in which responses are involved in determining whether or not

something counts as F. In the strand of the response-dependence project that concerns us here, this claim is not that our responses are in some way responsible for things being, say, yellow, rather, they are responsible for things *counting* as 'yellow'. Indeed, to conflate the claim that our colour *concepts* are response-dependent with the claim that colours themselves are response-dependent would amount to an instance of what Wittgenstein identified in the *Tractatus* as misunderstanding the logic of language (1981a 4.003) and of what he later recognised as 'interfering with the use of language' (2001 124), rather than simply offering a description of our practices of classifying things through thought and talk.

Basic equations are theorists' tools used to elucidate how responses are crucial to the determination of certain concepts' extensions. They are not intended as a representation of beliefs that users of those concepts ordinarily form about their own practices. Rather, they represent those practices, mapping the connection between responses, conditions and a concept's extension. As such, basic equations form part of the theory of those practices and have a role only in that philosophical context. Although they don't ordinarily do so, via sufficient reflection on their practices, a user of a concept would be able to derive its basic equation a priori.

That said, theorists are required to engage in a certain amount of a posteriori theorising if basic equations are to have substantial, non-trivial content. If the theory is to deliver accurate re-presentations, the 'appropriate' placeholder must be cashed out in a non-trivial way, generating the criteria used to rule conditions of response in and out so that not just any response makes it the case that something counts as 'yellow', thereby maintaining a distinction between something's seeming yellow and being 'yellow'. Some acquaintance with the relevant practices is required to understand a basic equation. This will include being aware that in practice we discount certain conditions as inappropriate for enabling the extension-determining response and so don't count responses that occur under such conditions as reliable indicators of whether something counts as 'yellow'.

2. Grammar and Response-Dependence As an attempt to represent practices, the basic equation ensues from actions and deeds, that lie, according to Wittgenstein, 'at the bottom of our language game' (1969, 204) and, as Wittgenstein invoking Goethe, is wont to remind us, are prior to language. (1969 402) Basic equations are true by dint of facts about our classificatory practices and a priori knowable by anyone acquainted with those practices. Response-dependence theorists have tended to emphasise that the basic equation is not intended as a rule that would dictate the use of a concept. However, in the context of Wittgenstein's picture of rules, it is usefully understood as a rule. Thus understood, the rule both reflects and guides practice, but it does not dictate practice prior to any move having been made. On this picture, correct use of a concept is that which is in accordance with the rule, but it is not correct by dint of having followed the rule per se, but by dint of its being in accordance with customary use of the concept (Wittgenstein 2001 199).

The basic equation is consonant with Wittgenstein's picture of grammar as 'a description of the language exposed' (MS 109-10). When such a description is provided, it reflects our practices back to us – we (re)describe ourselves to ourselves thereby gaining new understanding of those practices. Such descriptions take us back to ourselves, making our rules visible to us. Basic equations can be understood as grammatical propositions, rules that partly constitute the meaning of their constituents; yet our acting remains at the bottom of those rules. Typically of grammatical propositions, although it looks purely empirical, the basic equation functions both descriptively and normatively, describing our practice while at the same time manifesting the standards that guide our practices. On Wittgenstein's account, such propositions, with the form of empirical propositions, but with the function of rules, 'form the foundations of all operating with thoughts (with language)'. (1969 401)

The standards to which we hold our practices are themselves part of the grammar of our language. So in response-dependent practices, the practices whereby we discount as unreliable responses that don't occur under conditions that have tended to promote intra- and inter-personal consistency in the use of a concept are also part of that grammar. Pettit's 'ethocentric' approach to mapping those practices is thoroughly consonant with Wittgenstein's picture of grammar as a practical, human enterprise. Likewise, Wittgenstein reminds us that samples such as those used to indicate the features of material objects picked out by colour words and concepts are part of our system of representation, that is, part of grammar. Their status as samples is conferred on them by dint of their role within that system (2001 150). Grammar is embedded in and derives from our practices. It is part of our knowing *how* and is manifest in the ways we act and speak (1969 395) Through their re-presentation of our practices, basic equations make that grammar perspicuous, particularly the grammatical role played by our responses in determining the use of colour words and concepts. Wittgenstein reminds us that 'A word has the meaning someone has given to it.' (1958 28) Basic equations show how the meaning of certain terms are given to them, in the case of words used to classify things in terms of secondary qualities, they are given to them on the basis of our perceptual responses under certain conditions. Basic equations show us a priori what we have put into these concepts.

3. Hinge Propositions and Response-Dependence In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein introduces the idea of 'hinge' propositions, propositions that function as points in our web of belief that hold fast, enabling other propositions to pivot around them. They are, if you will, the beliefs on which our beliefs turn, upon which they hinge. (1969 341-4, 655) In practice hinge propositions are not subjected to doubt. Although they may once have been disputed, 'for unthinkable ages' these propositions have 'belonged to the scaffolding of our thoughts'. (1969 211) In Wittgenstein's terms they are *subjectively* and *objectively* certain: From our point of view as epistemic agents these propositions *feel* indubitable, we are convinced of them, doubting them would seem somehow unnatural. They are objectively certain, in Wittgenstein's terms, because they play a role such that to doubt them would not make sense, for in doubting them we allow the possibility of undermining our web of belief in its entirety, of removing its foundations. (1969 403) Hinge propositions include those the truth of which Moore attempted to prove, propositions concerning the existence of material objects (1959). Without such propositions functioning as hinges, other beliefs have no

ground from which to become established. Keeping these pivots stable enables us to remain confident in our practices, going on without constantly second-guessing our language, concepts and judgements, plunging them into the chaos that ensues when traditional scepticism gains traction (1969 613). Our hinge beliefs form part of our Welt-Bild, the 'inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.' Extending the language-game idea, Wittgenstein describes them as 'part of a kind of mythology', which can be 'learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.' (1969 94-5)

Wittgenstein implies that similar certainty and epistemic status is afforded to propositions in which the names of colours are attached to objects; we attach such words without doubt. (1969 522-531) I suggest that propositions similar to those encapsulated by the basic equation, propositions expressing a crucial relationship between the way objects look to us (under certain conditions) and their being labelled a certain colour, also function in practice as hinges acquired through initiation and involvement in practices. Specifically, in the taxonomy of types of hinge propositions assembled by Moyal-Sharrock, (2003 129) they would fall into the category of 'linguistic hinges', propositions that, earlier, Wittgenstein labelled 'grammatical rules'. Understood as hinge propositions they are of course part of the grammar of our language, but are recognised as serving a particular role in enabling language and thought.

These propositions are further characteristic of hinge propositions in that due to their empirical character, their negation makes sense. 'It is not the case that something is yellow just in case it looks yellow to us under C.' is able to be understood and is truth evaluable. But it does not make grammatical sense; it flies in the face of what we understand by 'yellow'. If this is not the correct use, and meaning, of 'yellow', then what is? If all such propositions about our colour terms are false, then, our whole web of beliefs about what colours things are begins unravel. As Glock argues (2004 71-73, n.1) a challenge to show that the ripe tomato is red is met only by appeal to grammar. According to Wittgenstein, I can know what colours things are because I can say how things are. In the colour case, I can say how things are because I can see how they are (1969 345). These moves do not constitute a response to the sceptic, Glock argues, rather they repudiate that challenge – there is nothing else to be said.

Moyal-Sharrock points out that in regular linguistic contexts, saying a hinge suggests that it does not go without saying, such a move arrests the language game (2003 135); whereas in the normal course of language, speakers' behaviour constitutes a manifestation of the rule in action. This is why the basic equation requires a philosophical context if it is to be of any practical value as a representation of practice. It is not ordinarily said by users of the concept it concerns, rather it is devised by philosophers to draw attention to particular aspects of those users' practices. It is a hinge *for us* but not for the theorist qua theorist, and not in the abnormal case in which we examine our practice because things have gone awry, such as we might when conditions conducive to colour perception are disrupted by events in our environment, such as ash clouds caused by volcanic eruptions. (Wittgenstein 2001 142)

A response-dependence analysis reveals the way in which the hinge status of propositions such as 'something is yellow just in case it looks yellow to us under C' is connected with the infallibility of our responses as to whether or not something counts as 'yellow'. The way in which we

rely upon our responses under certain conditions to determine whether or not something counts as 'yellow' shows why it doesn't make sense to doubt that the yellow-looking things are 'yellow'. Ordinarily, we don't doubt our responses, but our practice of relying on them is not something of which we are usually aware. The favourability of our responses is only revealed when something goes awry. Response-dependence analyses of certain concepts, then, map the limits of our practical certainty: while in the normal case it doesn't make sense to doubt that something that looks yellow to us is 'yellow', it is reasonable to suspend trust in our responses in cases where C doesn't obtain. And reflection on our practices confirms that we do indeed suspend trust in our responses when it is dark, say, or someone is colour-blind, or under the influence of hallucinatory substances, and theorists fill out C to exclude such cases. The basic equation, then, helps us refine our understanding of our lack of doubt in the usual case, but also illuminates the fact that there are moments at which our practices allow that certainty has its limits.

Literature

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