

Are moral reasons response-dependent?

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Abstract: Some moral realists draw on the analogy between colours and values in order to claim that ‘desirability’ is a quality to which agents are sensitive under ideal conditions. The paper sets out objections to Michael Smith’s view that moral reasons are response-dependent and that they constitute the kind of reasons which would motivate ideal agents. The agent’s response to what appears to him or her morally desirable or morally mandatory is not a response in the same sense that our perception of a colour is a response to a disposition in the object to produce that perception. For a responsible agent appreciates values and reasons in the light of a plurality of moral considerations.

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Francis Herbert Bradley, in the first chapter of *Appearance and Reality* (1893), formulates what could be a refined realist answer to subjectivist arguments about secondary qualities:

All the arguments, we may protest, do but show defect in, or interference with, the organ of perception. The fact that I cannot receive the secondary qualities except under certain conditions, fails to prove that they are not there and existing in the thing. [...] The qualities are constant in the things themselves; and, if they fail to impart themselves, or impart themselves wrongly, that is always due to something outside their nature. If we could perceive them, they are there (Bradley 1893: 13).

This is not Bradley’s own view on the problem of the reality of sensible qualities, but a possible realist move to counter arguments showing that colors and other qualities are essentially dependent on the perceiver. The answer manifests an acceptance of the dependence claim and insists that it does not diminish the reality of sensible qualities, since it means not that the qualities are in the perceivers only, but that they appear only to perceivers in certain conditions that are crucial to their being detected. In order to reject this variety of realism about secondary qualities, which stresses what we call their

response-dependence, Bradley gives what he believes to be several counter-examples, in which the case of sensible qualities is mixed with that of values:

To hold that one's mistress is charming, ever and in herself, is an article of faith, and beyond reach of question. But, if we turn to common things, the result will be otherwise. We observed that the disgusting and the pleasant may make part of the character of a taste or a smell, while to take these aspects as a constant quality, either of the thing or of the organ, seems more than unjustifiable, and even almost ridiculous (Bradley 1893: 14).

Bradley insists that since our only access to the quality is through our subjective response, the realist answer collapses. He does not see that, in this kind of analysis of our experience of secondary qualities, there is no decisive reason for considering the disposition to respond in the perceiver to be more fundamental than the disposition in the perceived to produce that response. Nor does he distinguish between the reasonable claim that without someone having the concept of being charmed and the disposition to be charmed, nothing would be considered as charming, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the controversial idealist thesis that not only being charming, but the charming *being*, is framed by our being charmed.

The mainstream face of contemporary uses of this kind of claim is that of Bradley's objector. The fact is that during the last decades, in philosophical aesthetics and moral theory, response-dependence accounts have fostered a realist turn in dispositionalist theories of values, somehow reviving what happened in the 18th century legacy of John Locke's account of secondary qualities, when Francis Hutcheson unexpectedly applied to values Locke's analysis of our ideas of powers.

Although it is historically correct that the analysis of values as response-dependent is broadly in line with early modern accounts of secondary qualities (Wilson 2011), there are significant differences between the two. For the thesis that secondary qualities, and perhaps values, are response-dependent is not identical with its Lockean cousin, i.e., the understanding of secondary qualities as dispositional or relational properties which are manifested only through interaction with other bodies or with observers. There is something more specific in the idea of response-dependence. Let us distinguish between two claims:

- (A) 'Blue' applies to things that look blue to perceivers.
- (B) 'Blue' applies to things that look blue to perceivers in normal conditions.

(A) characterises the quality corresponding to 'blue' as secondary in Locke's

sense, whereas (B) does something different. (B) says that 'blue' is response-dependent in the sense that it is a necessary truth that, for any perceiver in normal conditions, if something looks blue then 'blue' infallibly applies to it and if 'blue' applies to something then it automatically looks blue to whoever is in the right conditions to perceive it. Philip Pettit has claimed that it is an important aspect of the view of secondary qualities as response-dependent that 'error' and 'ignorance' are ruled out provided that perceivers are in normal conditions (1991: 597). These perceivers cannot fail to apprehend that if something appears blue it is indeed blue and if the thing is blue then they cannot miss the fact that it appears blue. So these perceivers, because they are in the appropriate observational situation, should have as a motto: trust appearances! This is not exactly what John Locke, or Descartes, or Galileo, would recommend. Appearances, they say, must be trusted in so far as the conduct of life is concerned as signs that are useful for our conservation, but not as a means of knowing what things are. Sensible qualities are not reliable pictures of objects.

What matters most to the realist move about secondary qualities as response-dependent is the idea that for a correct working of the response (in both ways, from our experience of appearance to our knowledge of reality and the other way round), a necessary and sufficient condition is that observers be in a normal perceptual situation. The normal situation must be easily accessible. A lot of people without special qualifications, perhaps all mature members of a species, can have access to it. Thanks to this necessary and sufficient condition, the needle on the compass of response-dependence leaves the pole of subjectivity and now indicates the pole of objectivity. Thus the use of secondary quality concepts is stabilised.

There is a considerable variety of ways to construe that kind of response-dependence claim. Its use is popular in many different philosophical fields, although it raises various difficulties. Is the thesis that they give rise to infallibility true of *all* response-dependent concepts, or only of some of them, depending on whether they satisfy specific requirements, as Richard Holton (1992) has claimed against Pettit? Should we understand 'normal conditions' in a statistical rather than normative way, as some suggest? (De Clercq 2002: 175) There are very interesting discussions about how to characterise 'normal conditions' in a non *ad hoc* way in each case of the response-dependence concept. For instance, if a theory claims that being funny is response-dependent but mentions the sense of comic among the normal conditions of aesthetic appreciation, it is not correct because of the obviously *ad hoc* characterisation of these conditions. This mistake should be carefully distinguished from the seeming circularity of the following thesis: being funny is response-dependent since it is a necessary truth that, for any observer O in the appropriate condi-

tions, if x is funny then O finds it funny (i.e., smiles or laughs) and if O finds it funny then x is funny. As Wiggins says, the quality of being funny and our being amused are “made for one another” (1998: 107-108). The repetition of funny is not problematic here since this thesis does just the job of making explicit the response-dependent character of being funny. What would destroy the response-dependence claim about being funny would be the inclusion of the sense of the funny among the conditions of observation, since the sense of the funny is precisely what the response-dependence thesis tries to elucidate.

My point here is to discuss, and raise a couple of objections against, the application of such a view not to values in general, but to moral reasons and to values that essentially depend on moral considerations. Michael Smith, in chapter 6 of his ground-breaking book *The Moral Problem* (1994), has proposed a daring analysis of rightness as being response-dependent. According to him, putting it roughly, it is a necessary truth that, for people in certain conditions (fully rational agents), if ‘morally right’ correctly applies to an act in particular circumstances, then that act would be what these people would desire to do in these circumstances, and if these people would desire to do (or would want us to desire to do) that act in these circumstances, then it is ‘morally right’. The conditions that are mentioned here, being conditions of full rationality, are more akin to ideal, rather than normal conditions.

There is in this project a kind of hybridisation between two different discussions, which both have an important background in 18th century British moral philosophy: the discussion on the analogy between values and secondary qualities, notably colours, on the one hand, and the discussion concerning the practical necessity of having recourse to ideal observers (see Firth 1952) or judges, on the other.

In the first part of the paper, I set out Michael Smith’s analysis of moral judgement. In the second part, I briefly raise questions about the use of ideal judges in moral philosophy, which I think useful but in a more modest manner than Smith’s. The final part of this paper argues against Smith that moral reasons are not response-dependent and that the response-dependence approach as a strategy of moral realism cannot be applied here.

1. *What role do evaluative beliefs about response-dependent moral reasons play in moral life?*

Michael Smith defends the view, against Hume and his contemporary followers, that moral judgements must be understood as “expressions of beliefs rather than expressions of our ‘sentiments’”. Smith also claims that acknowl-

edging what he calls the practicality requirement on moral judgement — that is, the internalist thesis that if the agent *A* judges that it is right to ϕ , then *A* is motivated to ϕ or *A* is irrational — does not lead us to accept the Humean theory of normative reasons, that is, the thesis that normative reasons are identical with the desires of the agent. On the contrary, we can hold that moral judgement is basically an expression of a belief about the existence of normative reasons, and thus account in a rationalist manner for the link between moral judgement and motivation:

For, very roughly, if we believe that ϕ -ing in certain circumstances *C* has the feature that we would want acts to have in *C* if we were fully rational then, on the one hand, to the extent we are rational either we will already want to ϕ in *C* or our belief will cause us to have this want, and, on the other, to the extent that we do not want to ϕ in *C* and our belief does not cause us to have this want we will not be fully rational (Smith 1994: 193).

Smith thinks that this analysis of moral judgement as an expression of an evaluative belief fits in with the weak version of judgement internalism which he terms the “practicality requirement”. The evaluative belief that is expressed, here, is the a priori knowledge that, for an act in certain circumstances *C*, being desirable (that is, deserving to be desired), is just to be what we would desire us to do, in *C*, were we fully rational; or, in other terms, the a priori knowledge that if ϕ is the right thing to do in *C*, then fully rational agents would desire to ϕ in *C*, and that if fully rational agents would desire to ϕ in *C*, then ϕ is the right thing to do in *C*. We recognise in this the necessity of a bi-conditional that is typical of response-dependence analyses. If we know that fully rational agents would want to ϕ , we know that we have a moral reason to ϕ . But do we have, then, a motivating reason to ϕ , independently of the desires we already have?

Let us get back to the practicality requirement. Smith says that this requirement is satisfied if, being not practically irrational, we already desire to ϕ independently of our evaluative belief about what fully rational agents would want. But this is not conclusive. For it is here that the Humean theory of moral reasons, which construe them in terms of desires or sentiments, correctly accounts for the practicality requirement in this case where the evaluative belief does not play any role except ensuring us that motivations we already have would be approved of by ideal agents, which is nice, but not indispensable for our being thus motivated. Therefore, the only case in which our evaluative belief (that there exists a moral reason to ϕ that depends on the response of rational agents) plays a crucial role in our motivation is when “our belief will cause us to have this want”, as Smith says in the passage I have quoted above (193).

Let us suppose that I have the evaluative belief that fully rational agents

would want me not to tell my neighbour that he has terrible taste and that I hate his garden dwarfs, but the fact is that I do not desire to keep my mouth shut. According to Smith, either I am practically irrational, or this evaluative belief will cause me to desire to remain silent about this. But a causal relation between a belief and a motivation is a weaker connection than the kind of internal connection that judgement internalism requires.

In passing, let us pay attention to a point to which I will return soon. Fully rational agents would not want me to tell this to my neighbour. Why? For several possible reasons. For instance, because my neighbour has a right to populate his own garden with dwarfs. Or because to tell him about it would make him very sad since he is hypersensitive on the topic. Or because if I allow myself to talk to him about his dwarfs, then I would have also to reproach him for his dog, etc., and our coexistence would become even more difficult. Or because polite people or Stoic philosophers know that they should not tell other people about their defects etc. What is interesting here is that, obviously, the content of the evaluative belief about what ideal agents would desire is directly and entirely dependent on normative conceptions. This is not an objection for philosophers who, like Michael Smith, accept the view that a meta-ethical account of moral judgement is grounded in normative ethics. However, one question is whether the content of the evaluative belief is dependent on a particular moral doctrine or, rather, on a conversation between moral doctrines, which is crucial to moral culture. It appears that Smith's understanding of the content of the evaluative belief rests upon a specific, deontological, view of morality.

There might be a problem here for philosophers who, like Smith, reject judgement externalism. If "fully rational agents" means saints, or people with a sense of duty, or moral maximisers, or utilitarian agents, or the Aristotelian *phronimos*, etc., in a word, if being rational means having a moral behaviour in such and such a substantive understanding of the moral, the problem, contrary to what we might think, is not that of the circularity, which is not vicious, between "having a moral reason", on the one hand, and "knowing what moral people would prefer to do in the circumstances" on the other hand, but it is a problem for the judgement internalist. Why? Because then the link between our moral judgement and our motivation to act accordingly is not a built-in connection. It just amounts to saying that we would be motivated were we moral. Then we relapse into what Smith rejects as "moral fetishism". The connection between judgement and motivation would entirely rest upon the background conditions of people being used to be moral or having a sense of morals.

For Michael Smith, to have an objective normative reason to ϕ in real life is to believe that were we fully rational then we would desire to ϕ and would want anybody in the circumstances, including us in the real life, to desire to ϕ .

As Terence Cuneo points out,

to offer an explanation of why there is a necessary connection between the moral judgements and moral motivations of an idealised agent is not perforce to offer an explanation of why there is a necessary connection between the judgements and motivations of the ordinary virtuous agent. Ordinary virtuous agents are not, after all, idealised agents in ideal conditions (Cuneo 2001: 579).

In Smith's account, having a moral reason amounts to having the evaluative belief that in ideal conditions our motivating reason, that is, the psychological state or set of psychological states he calls 'desire', would be identical with the appropriate moral reason. One problem is that while on the one hand there is an intrinsic connection, albeit 'defeasible', between moral judgement and motivation, and certainly a stronger connection (identity) between desires and motivations, on the other hand I doubt we may invoke more than 'coherence' between our beliefs about what we should do and our motivations. 'Coherence' between psychological states is not a conceptual, or intrinsic connection between them, but a factual situation we often aim at without being able to achieve it; it is also contextual and thus mobile and subject to revision. I might be as coherent as I can in a situation where, knowing perfectly that a fully rational being would want me to ϕ in these circumstances, and aware of my frailty, I decide not to act on the premise that I ought to do what a fully rational being would want me to do.

Moreover, we might, and I think we should, accept the weaker view that the evaluative belief about what a more rational agent would do or would want us to do plays an important role in moral life, as a means of self-criticism, without subscribing to Michael Smith's conclusion that the reference to ideal conditions opens the way to the realm of categorical imperatives, that is moral obligations that do not depend on our desires. How should we account for the relations between our desires in the evaluated world and our belief about the evaluating world? Coherence does not help. For, by stipulation, beliefs and desires are maximally coherent in the evaluating world, whereas, in the evaluated world, if coherence is a problem, it can hardly be solved, I think, by the sole recourse to my belief about the evaluating world. This is why it seems difficult to follow Smith when he writes:

An agent who believes that she would desire that she ϕ s in C if she were fully rational rationally should desire that she ϕ s in C. And this claim is indeed true. For those who both believe that they would desire that they ϕ in circumstances C if they had a set of desires that is maximally coherent and unified and who also desire that they ϕ in C have a psychology that, in this respect, exhibits more in the way of coherence than those who have the belief but lack the desire. Rationality, in the sense of this sort

of coherence, is thus on the side of agents whose desires match their beliefs about the desires they would have if they were fully rational (Smith 1996: 161-162).

As Smith of course admits, an agent believing that he or she is desiring to φ is not identical with his or her desiring to φ . Thus having the belief does not provide the agent with a motivation. Then causal relations between beliefs and desires appear to be the only option available in the case of an agent who has the evaluative belief but lacks the corresponding desire.

Causal relations between our evaluative beliefs and our desires depend on the state of our character and the beliefs we have about the kind of person we are. If I think from my experience that behaving like a more rational agent could lead me or the people around me to a worse situation, my belief about what a more rational person would do in the circumstances could give me the picture of exactly what I should not do. I can have both an evaluative belief about rational agents' responses and an evaluative belief about my own very weak practical rationality. Smith is aware of the objection:

The depressive's beliefs about the normative reasons she has in her depressed state are beliefs about what her fully rational self would want her depressed self to do, not what her fully rational self would want her fully rational self to do. In the language of 'evaluating' and 'evaluated' worlds her beliefs about her normative reasons are beliefs about what her (fully rational) self in the evaluating world wants her (depressed) self in the evaluated world to do, not what she believes her (fully rational) self in the evaluating world wants her (fully rational) self in the evaluating world to do (Smith 1996: 163).

Smith claims this in order to escape Swanton's objection that C2 — "if an agent believes she has a normative reason to φ , then she rationally should desire to φ " (Smith 1994: 148) — is obviously false in certain cases. Let us think of cases that we could call 'I would prefer not to' situations, which are not always cases of practical irrationality, as the example of the depressive suggests, but rather cases of awareness of the limits of practical rationality: for instance, a case in which I know that a more rational person would tell you the truth, but I prefer not to tell you, because I know it would be hurtful. But there is a high price to pay in that case. For since we are not fully rational in the evaluated world all our beliefs about normative reasons would be beliefs about what our fully rational self would want our comparatively weak self to do. Then our fully rational self would not demand morality from us, but would recommend prudence, caution. I do not see how this is compatible with Smith's claim that "if there is some normative reason for some agent to φ in certain circumstances C then there is a like normative reason for all those who find themselves in circumstances C to φ " (1994: 182), unless we include in C the current state of the agent's rationality. This is a high price for a Kantian, but not for those who

accept the view that weakly rational beings may know astutely how to avoid vices and promote happiness as much as they can.

In an ideal judge theory, our beliefs about the evaluating world should have a special authority over our behaviour in the evaluated world. Causal relations are a poor substitute for this authority. Perhaps we should accept the consequences of the instability of the effects of evaluative beliefs on desires. Stoics recommend that we consider people we love as being mere human beings, in a sense that downplays their value and personal importance for us. Suppose Stoics are the best embodiment of fully rational agents. It may be better not to try to do what they would want us to do.

If this is correct, then we should rectify Smith's formulation of weak judgement internalism, and propose rather what we may call an even weaker judgement internalism.

- Weak judgement internalism: if the agent A judges that it is right to φ , then A is motivated to φ or A is irrational.

- Even weaker judgement internalism: if the agent A judges that it is right to φ , then A is motivated to φ or A is irrational or aware that he or she is weakly rational.

2. *What is the use of ideal conditions of rationality in the theory of moral judgement?*

Smith considers that to have a moral reason is to know about what fully rational agents would desire us to do. His fully rational agents are, a fortiori, *more* rational agents. This is why, without contradicting himself, he sometimes speaks of the use, in moral life, of asking about what *more* rational agents would do: for instance, when he says: "all that is required is the ability to think about what a more rational creature would want" (1994: 200). But, conversely, why the reference to the point of view of (merely) *more* rational agents is not sufficient? Why do we need the superlative?

The comparative would be sufficient if the use of conditions of rationality was critical (regulative, to use a Kantian term), or only epistemic (to make us know more explicitly what our principles are), and not constitutive. If the point was that of moral criticism, that of checking whether I could go on with my *prima facie* moral desires, then considering what more rational persons would think might help. We would need then to consider minimal, not maximal, conditions of rationality. This is, I think, the right path.

This understanding of conditions of rationality may be compared to what Kant calls the type of judgement in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, which is a

method that a non Kantian (whether Hobbesian, Humean, or utilitarian) may find relevant. The typical is a procedure by which agents can evaluate the maxim of their action on moral principles; the procedure, which basically consists in imagining what would happen were all agents to act upon the premise I envisage, does not make any action morally good, but allows to make sure (perhaps 'make sure' is too strong here, at least for a non Kantian) that it is not bad. We might also think of the Golden Rule, or of similar methods of imaginarily putting oneself in the place of others, as instances of an epistemic or a critical, not constitutive, use of counterfactual conditions of rationality.

To get back to the distinction between the comparative conception and the superlative conception of the use of conditions of rationality, the latter suggests a difference in nature between ideal and non-ideal conditions, whereas the former is happy with a difference in degrees. According to the superlative or maximalist view, conditions of rationality give us access to a sovereign realm of reasons. The comparative conception is well illustrated by Simon Blackburn's Humean scale of desires, from the most partial and agent-centred concern, to a more impartial and other-centred concern (1998: 265).

What we are discussing here is a very general scheme, which can be fleshed out in a great variety of ways. For instance, a well-known question to which there are several possible answers is about the kind of information rational agents in ideal conditions have access to. Another set of questions, and possibly of objections, is about the content of being 'fully rational', which Simon Blackburn terms "a very slippery fish" (1998: 117). As suggested by Smith's criticism, in the final chapter of *The Moral Problem*, of David Gauthier's conception of 'being rational' as "trying to maximise one's individual interest", the understanding of rationality that is involved here rests upon a normative conception of what is the good for an agent. Conceiving what is a correct practical deliberation is inseparable from conceiving what kind of agent is the deliberator, what kind of good the agent seeks, what is, for the agent, the desirable. Is it a private good? A collective? A universal good? The variety of possible understandings of rationality thus mirrors the diversity of moral doctrines. Therefore, when Smith claims that desirability is response-dependent, i.e., corresponds to what rational agents would desire, we need to know more about the kind of deliberators they are and the way in which they desire. We need to know whether they are Kantian persons, free and reasonable, or Hobbesian individuals trying to save their skin, or utilitarian altruists, etc. The main lines of our understanding of what is morally desirable are already decided in the picture we favour of what a practically rational agent is. Concepts of agency, of rationality, of desirability, seem to be reciprocal and equally normative. It is difficult to determine which of them is more basic than the others.

3. *Are moral reasons response-dependent?*

Is the correct analysis of moral reasons similar to the response-dependence analysis of colours? What we are discussing is not a *reductive* attempt to account for our moral responses through the analogy with the perception of colours in normal conditions, since the claim that we could characterise the conditions for the access to moral values without drawing on what we already know about the content of morality would be absurd. It is part of the definition of a moral response (for instance, of an appropriate emotion of resentment, or a proper practical reaction) that it is not what is *de facto* triggered, but what is *de jure* required, merited, by a situation or an object. Provided that we consider the analysis of moral judgement in the light of the response-dependence of colours as *non reductive*, there is no objection in the fact that adequate conditions for the quasi perception of values cannot be determined without mentioning normative and even moral conditions (on this objection, see De Clercq 2002). But then it is not clear whether the analysis of our experience of values in response-dependence terms truly is an analysis, or just an elucidation or a manner of making more explicit what we mean when we speak about our access to values. Simon Blackburn (1993) has objected to Michael Smith that response-dependence analyses do not allow us to make any advance in our understanding of moral judgement, since they rest upon moral judgement in the appreciation of the correct conditions for the response. Smith's subtle answer consists in saying that the response-dependence analysis of our experience of values is not more 'non reductive' than the response-dependence analysis of our knowledge of colours, which Blackburn accepts, it seems, as an analysis from which we learn something (Smith 1998). This *ad hominem* argument against Blackburn rests upon the claim that there is a deep analogy between our access to colours and our access to values: if you accept the one, you must swallow the other. However, we have good reasons to reject the analogy.

I will not elaborate on an important difficulty, which concerns the use of ideal conditions rather than of normal conditions for the access to and manifestation of the response-dependent 'desirability' or 'rightness'. Normal conditions are supposed to be easily accessible. Ideal conditions are impressive, but who knows them? Catherine Wilson has pointed out the possible incompatibility between genuine response-dependence explanations and the substitution of normal conditions with ideal conditions:

The means by which moral knowledge might be wrested from the environment by ordinary people is obscured by the characterisation of the observer as especially qualified (Wilson 2011: 103).

Specifying ideal rather than normal conditions tends to restrict access to, and therefore diminish the publicity of, response-dependent properties. However, Smith would respond that ordinary people have easy access to the knowledge of what ideal agents would do. You need not be an ideal agent to have this knowledge. Therefore, to be faithful to Smith's argument, we should distinguish between two formulations:

A moral reason is the kind of reason to which I would respond were I a fully rational agent.

Such a claim may suggest that as long as we are not fully rational agents we cannot respond to moral reasons, which would be absurd.

A better formulation:

A moral reason is the kind of reason to which I can respond provided that I believe that I would respond to it were I a fully rational agent.

Another worry is about how to distinguish between the ideal and the normal. Philip Pettit tries to flesh out the distinction between normal and ideal conditions in terms of presence and absence:

Normal circumstances will be ones in which certain obstacles are lacking, ideal circumstances will be ones in which certain desirable facilities are present: say, all the relevant evidence is available (Pettit 1991: 594).

I am not certain that this really helps, since, in the case of the perception of colours, normal conditions are circumstances where all relevant evidence is available, whereas ideal conditions may be viewed as circumstances in which all possible obstacles are lacking. Therefore normal conditions cannot be viewed as conditions of absence and ideal conditions as conditions of presence. Should we rather characterise normal conditions as minimal, necessary and sufficient, and ideal conditions as maximal, sufficient, and not necessary? We would have to pay attention to the fact that ideal conditions are just stipulated: ideal conditions of rationality are identical with conditions from which all irrationality is absent. In fact, I doubt that we can correctly characterise these conditions, whether ideal or normal, as sufficient, in the case of moral responses.

Let us focus on the principal argument against the analogy between colours and values, and thus against the claim that there might be sufficient conditions of the manifestation of rightness. In matters of evaluation, disagreement between well informed people cannot be a priori reduced to an effect of obstinate belief in defiance of facts; while in the case of visual experience, as Stephen Toulmin said more than sixty years ago:

Differences over the properties of an object cannot (like differences over its value) be put down to differences in ‘attitude’ or ‘disposition’: if one were asked, ‘How is it that *you* say this is red, and *he* says it’s green?’, to say, ‘We just *feel* differently about it’, would be no answer (Toulmin 1950: 126-127).

Our perception of colours cannot be altered by an argument, whereas our moral responses to a situation may change in the light of ethical argument. A similar point has been made by Allan Gibbard:

Feelings respond to judgements in a way that colour experience doesn’t. We can ask ourselves how to feel about something, and the feelings themselves are somewhat responsive to the answer (Gibbard 2006: 212).

Although he did not deal explicitly with response-dependence accounts of value, there is much to learn from Toulmin’s opposition between ethical normativity and scientific prediction. Among other things, scientific judgement correlates appearances, that is, normal responses in observers, with reality or physical properties. Thus scientific judgement allows us to expect certain responses in certain circumstances. To take one example from Toulmin, “I suppose that if one lived in a balloon at a height of eighty miles one would never have red sunsets” (128). We recognise here a response-dependence claim about the perception of the sun as being yellow, not red. Now, it is not the job of moral judgement, but “the job of psychology” “to predict our actions and responses” (125). Applied to our discussion of Smith’s account of normative reasons, this means that when we have a belief about what fully rational agents would want to do, we are expressing how we expect them to behave. For Toulmin, this kind of belief is not evaluative, but descriptive. Smith would respond that it is evaluative as a belief about what fully rational agents would want us to desire in the circumstances. Against Smith, we must consider that it is evaluative only in so far as it has the kind of influence on our conduct, our moral judgement and the moral judgement of others have.

According to Toulmin, the “difference in function between scientific and moral judgement” is: the one is “concerned to alter expectations, the other to alter feelings and behaviour” (129). When I judge that this conduct is not that wicked, contrary to what I thought or what they think, I do not describe the kind of reaction we are expected to have, I tend to alter my feelings or the feelings of others, and, possibly my or their behaviour.

Perhaps Toulmin should contrast moral judgements with judgements of sense-perception rather than with scientific judgements. After all, scientific judgements, understood as theoretical rather than observational judgements, are essentially vulnerable to criticism in a manner that could be compared with

the way in which moral judgements are open to discussion (see Wilson 2011). In any case, Toulmin interestingly suggests that our evaluations react to arguments in a way our perceptual acquaintance with colours does not.

This line of argument is even more powerful, I think, if we substitute 'values' with 'reasons'. Substantive normative considerations and moral arguments do not intervene only at the level of the theoretical conception of practical rationality, but also play a major role in moral deliberation and are thus integral parts of practical rationality. Do I think that a moral reason is what a rational agent or deliberator would respond to in the same manner as I believe that redness applies to objects looking red in daylight? No. For among the platitudes about moral reasons there is the platitude that their authority is dependent on and affected by moral critique in a way that makes improbable, as Wiggins notices, what he calls 'convergence', i.e., one of the marks of truth ('Truth, and Truth Predicated of Moral Judgement', in Wiggins 1998). We are not here in a situation where, examining whether p , we would have no option but admitting that p .

Toulmin's argument may be qualified as far as aesthetic values are concerned. For the major function of criticism in the appreciation of aesthetic values is to refine taste. Many people, following Hume, consider that a good taste is a disposition to sense qualities other people do not see. There might be room for a response-dependence account of aesthetic values. When we turn to moral reasons, the picture is different. Moral judgements about what we should do in particular situations involve more than the appreciation of the value of the action we consider. A moral judgement being connected with a motivation in a more or less tight way, the function of criticism is different since it may impact not only our views, but also our decisions. Here ethical arguments show that other practical options are also plausible. Reasons for acting closely depend on the variety of reasons for believing that we should act in this or that way. This is fortunate, since there are very often competing reactions to a moral practical problem, not just one manifest correct response. Contrary to what we might think, the multiplicity of possibly relevant responses does not lead to paralysing hesitation, but allows us to confront complex situations.

I have suggested that Toulmin's argument about the alleged response-dependence of moral notions might be answered in the case of aesthetic values. We might accept that liability to criticism does not diminish their response-dependence nature, provided that refinement is part of the background conditions of the 'perception' of values. The problem however would remain that specification of those conditions is not substantial in Crispin Wright's sense (see De Clercq 2002: 160-161), but *ad hoc*. As far as moral reasons, contrasted with aesthetic values, are concerned, the application of Toulmin's argument is

devastating because criticism is not a part of the background conditions, but of the very process of responding to the situation.

How should we understand the links between moral criticism and the access to moral reasons? Brad Thompson writes:

The philosophical enterprise of exchanging arguments and counterexamples can be seen in this light as a mechanism for, collectively, attempting to get closer to the epistemically privileged position from which moral knowledge is secured with the greatest certainty (Thompson 2006: 76).

I rather think that the epistemically privileged position is that of exchanging arguments. Argumentation is not an antecedent, but constitutive work. Our feelings and desires are not under our direct control, although they play a central role in our responses to practical situations. However, they may be altered by arguments, judgements, opinions, including of course the opinion of other people and especially their moral conceptions, even if, nay, because they differ from mine.

Brad Thomson's remark echoes Smith's very optimistic view:

When we analyse the concept of a normative reason in this way I claim that normative reasons turn out to be thoroughly objective. They turn out to be thoroughly objective because, via a conversational process involving rational reflection and argument, we are each able to come up with an answer to the question 'What would we have normative reason to do if we were in such and such circumstances?' and our answers to this question, provided we have each reflected properly, will be one and the same (Smith 1996: 161).

I think our answers to this question, even if each of us has reflected properly, could be one and the same only if we shared the same normative conceptions. This necessary condition, that anchors the theory of moral judgement in substantive ethics, may perhaps be fulfilled (for instance if we agree to converse only between deontologists), but in any case it is not a sufficient condition for reaching the same answer to a practical question, for the simple reason that part of an agent's answer to the question about what he or she should do depends on his or her decision as well as on the arguments and normative views of people on the case. We need therefore the diversity of normative views, what I call moral culture, as the appropriate light to consider our practical options. The metaphor of 'appropriate light' does not imply that reasons are response-dependent. Mark Johnston makes a comment, which seems to me an objection to response-dependence views of reasons:

Allowing that there may be different acceptable ways of weighing reasons seems necessary given the enormous diversity of value, the controversial nature of claims

about how to weigh evaluative considerations from disparate domains, and reasonable scepticism about critical reflection's capacity to dissolve such controversy (Johnston in Smith, Lewis, and Johnston 1989).

This is why it is difficult to accept Smith's claim that normative reasons are "thoroughly objective". The conversational process is open and must go on till the urgency calls for our commitments as agents who then trust their best judgement at their own risk.

To sum up, the agent's response to what appears to him or her morally desirable or morally mandatory is not a response in the same sense that our perception of a colour is a response to a disposition in the object to produce that perception. Before even discussing the question whether the realist is correct in the interpretation of the objective counterpart or our moral responses to practical situations, we should pay more attention to the equivocal use of the term 'responses' and notice that in the case of colour experiences, our response is not a personal commitment based upon our understanding of reasons.

If, stepping out of the shop to check in the daylight the real colour of the shirt I am tempted to buy, which is red, I claim that it is green, there are two possibilities: either my visual apparatus is not in a good shape or I am just pretending to see it as green. In the latter case, I am in bad faith. I cannot give reasons for my seeing it as green, since the only basis for this colour ascription is my visual experience in normal conditions, to which I have access. As Toulmin pointed out, colour ascription is not sensitive to judgements or arguments, so that I cannot justify my denial of it being red. Of course, someone with a refined knowledge of colour shades, such as a professional painter, could teach me the vocabulary that would allow me to claim that the shirt is alizarin crimson. But this would not imply that I was not having access to the phenomenal content of the colour, although it would improve my ability to account for my qualitative experience.

Now, if we consider the case of the access to values, and especially, shifting from mere axiology to practical normativity, the case of values that we do not only appreciate or contemplate, but that recommend, prohibit, or demand action on our part and from others, even when I am perceiving an action as desirable for any agent in these circumstances, I may still be sensitive to arguments or judgements, which tend to show that, under certain aspects, this action is not desirable. This is in line with the conception, defended above, that what we need is a comparative, not superlative, use of conditions or rationality.

What I am speaking of is the process of individual or collective deliberation. Of course, in the urgency of action, I should make a decision, which de-

pends precisely on my moral judgement. The ‘practical requirement’ of moral judgement should be viewed rather as a practical commitment. If I am rational enough to see that the action under consideration is desirable, there is another manner of explaining why I could still claim that it is not, beyond the options of my being in a pathological state or in bad faith: that of a responsible agent who does not simply respond to values, but appreciates them in the light of a plurality of moral considerations and also of all the information he or she may have about the practical situation, and who assumes the partial responsibility, so to speak, of his or her response. So that, although real moral disagreements exist because what is morally wrong in this situation cannot be correctly viewed as morally not wrong, there is no situation in which the possibility of legitimate doubt or alternative judgement would be ruled out in principle.

However, moral judgement as personal commitment should not be construed in a maximalist way. It is not up to us to decide whether this or that ought to be done or not, but it is up to us to decide when we stop our moral inquiry. As Gibbard says: “With morals, there ... seems to be something genuinely at issue in the question whether, say, all prostitution is wrong” (Gibbard 2006: 211). There is much to learn from Gibbard’s remark that identifying an action or attitude as wrong does not consist in classifying it as wrong as we classify colours, but in being against what is wrong; we should add being, *practically* against it. Thus, when we ‘respond’ to reasons we do something, and we do it for some reasons. The plurality of moral doctrines, what we may call moral culture, is the reservoir from which we learn the conflict of reasons and the variety of responses to practical situations. I do not see why a fully rational being, with the most coherent set of desires and beliefs, should not be in need of moral culture.¹

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