

Varieties of Response-Dependence: A Critique of Zangwill

Nick Zangwill offers a nonrealist account of aesthetic properties that takes them to be dispositions to produce responses; he argues that this makes them dependent on our aesthetic experiences and responses, and thus mind-dependent. He argues for two theses: first, that aesthetic properties supervene on sensory properties, and second, that sensory properties are response-dependent and mind-dependent. These two theses taken together support his conclusion, that aesthetic properties are also response-dependent and mind-dependent: like sensory properties, they are “not part of the ‘objective world’—a world that is left over when we subtract human beings.”ⁱ This claim about mind-dependence is what makes Zangwill’s account of aesthetic properties nonrealist, and the success of his argument for aesthetic nonrealism depends heavily on the success of his argument for nonrealism about sensory properties.

I thus offer a critique of his account of sensory properties, finding two major difficulties: first, an unjustified move from conceptual to ontological response-dependence, and second, an all-too-common confusion between the dispositions and the manifestations of sensory properties. While I allow that aesthetic properties may supervene on sensory properties, as Zangwill claims, I conclude that his nonrealism about sensory properties is unjustified, and that his case for aesthetic nonrealism is therefore unsuccessful. The door remains open for a dispositional account of sensory and aesthetic properties according to which they are real properties belonging to objects. The benefit of such a realist account, as Zangwill recognizes, is that it can easily accommodate and explain the normative elements of our aesthetic discourse.

I. TWO VERSIONS OF THE PRIMARY/SECONDARY QUALITY DISTINCTION

Zangwill’s case for nonrealism about sensory properties begins with the claim that they are secondary qualities, a claim with which I would agree provided that what he has in mind is something akin to Locke’s primary/secondary quality distinction. According to Locke, an object’s secondary qualities are its powers to operate on our senses, producing in us the ideas of colors, sounds, smells, tastes, etc.ⁱⁱ These powers depend on the object’s primary qualities. For Locke, primary qualities have two important features: they are in objects regardless of whether they are perceived; and perception of them produces ideas in us that resemble the qualities as they are in the objects.ⁱⁱⁱ Call these the *independent existence criterion* and the *resemblance criterion*.

Locke’s primary qualities are much like the categorical properties in the categorical/dispositional distinction used in the powers and dispositions literature; Locke’s secondary and tertiary qualities together correspond roughly to the dispositional properties.^{iv} The categorical/dispositional distinction highlights the difference between the static, structural features of objects—categorical properties—and their causal powers, directed at certain event types wherein they manifest themselves—dispositional properties. Dispositional realists such as myself hold,

importantly, that the dispositional properties are actual properties of objects that exist independently of whether they ever in fact manifest.^v For the dispositional realist, secondary qualities meet the independent existence criterion mentioned above. This is the point at which Zangwill's version of the primary/secondary quality distinction diverges from my own: for Zangwill, the *independent existence criterion* distinguishes primary from secondary qualities. According to Zangwill, a secondary quality (or response-dependent property) is dispositional and "depends on the experiences of normal human beings under normal conditions," while a primary quality does not.^{vi}

II. RESPONSE-DEPENDENCE: EPISTEMIC, CONCEPTUAL, OR ONTOLOGICAL?

Simply standing in relation to human responses does not necessitate mind-dependence. When I pick up a box of books, I experience its mass as gravitational pull; the resulting sensation of weightiness is a human response, yet mass is not a mind-dependent property. Whether a property is mind-dependent is instead determined by the nature of the relation that stands between it and responses to it, and in particular the *kind* of dependence that holds. So the question is, what dependence relations are available to help us understand the claim that secondary qualities, like sensory properties, depend on the experience of normal human beings under normal conditions? I shall consider three possibilities: epistemic, conceptual, and ontological dependence.^{vii}

The first possibility is that of *epistemic dependence*: knowledge of x is dependent on knowledge of y if x cannot be known unless y is known. If sensory properties are epistemically response-dependent, we should say that in order to know that a fire engine is red, I must know that my experience is characterized by red qualia. The second possible dependence relation is that of *conceptual dependence*. If sensory properties are conceptually dependent on human responses, then in order to understand what a sensory property is, we must understand what the appropriate human responses are. Sensory properties appear to be good candidates for conceptual dependence on human responses; it is quite plausible that what it means to be red, loud, sweet, or pungent depends on what it means for us to experience something as red, loud, sweet, or pungent. The third possible dependence relation is that of ontological dependence. An entity x is ontologically dependent on another entity y if the existence of y is necessary for the existence of x . In this sense, one might say that the hole in the center of a doughnut depends on the existence of the doughnut, and Caesar's assassination depends on the existence of Caesar.^{viii} Zangwill's claim is that because sensory properties depend on human responses, they are not part of the objective world, a world left over when we subtract humans. This is a claim about the nature and existence of sensory properties, and so the dependence in question needs to be ontological.

If sensory properties are epistemically dependent on our responses, then it would be the knowledge of sensory properties that disappears when humans and their experiences are subtracted from the world. So accepting epistemic response-dependence would not force us to accept nonrealism about sensory properties. If sensory properties are conceptually response-dependent, the subtraction of humans and their responses would make it impossible to understand what is meant by "redness" or "sweetness." As James Van Cleve notes, "Empiricists typically maintain that we understand what an external thing like a tree or table is only by knowing what experiences it would induce in us, so that the concepts we apply to physical things depend on the concepts we apply to our experiences."^{ix} But we do not infer from this epistemic response-dependence that trees and tables depend for their very existence on our experiences of them. Accepting conceptual response-dependence does not force us to accept nonrealism about sensory properties, either.

Zangwill's claim about the nature and existence of sensory properties, that they are not part of a world without humans, can only be maintained if the response-dependence in question is ontological. Existential dependence is found not in epistemic or conceptual dependence relations

but only in ontological dependence. Zangwill recognizes that the response-dependence question is a metaphysical one, rather than a semantic or conceptual one,^x but I shall argue that his case for sensory property response-dependence and nonrealism only goes so far as to show that sensory properties are conceptually response-dependent.

III. RESPONSES AND DISPOSITIONS

For sensory properties to fail Zangwill's test for objectivity, I have argued, they must be ontologically dependent on human responses and thus minds. Now in order to determine whether sensory properties can in fact be ontologically dependent on responses (rather than just epistemically or conceptually dependent), we have to determine what the responses in question are. "Responses" here may be construed in several ways: we might take them to be a specific set of actual responses, or actual responses of the right sort generally speaking, or the hypothetical responses to be expected from normal humans. The first two options would give us an account of sensory properties in which, if a particular response or a general sort of response doesn't actually exist, then neither does the sensory property in question. This leads to the absurd conclusion that tea is flavorless when not being tasted, fire engines are colorless when unobserved, and falling trees are silent if no one is there to hear them.

The third possible way of understanding which responses sensory properties are supposed to depend upon is more promising, however. Referring to the hypothetical responses of normal humans allows us to invoke dispositional descriptions in the form of subjunctive conditionals: the responses in question are *those that a normal human would have, if he or she were to experience the object with the relevant sensory property*. This dispositional analysis, unlike the other two possibilities, avoids dependence on actual responses and accommodates our intuition that objects do not lose their sensory properties when unperceived. This is, I believe, a notion that is both basic to our everyday understanding of sensory properties and worth preserving in any philosophical analysis. Our concept of objects' coloration allows for a connection between appearance and reality, but also for a disconnect between the two. We commonly hold, for instance, that red objects are still red when no one is perceiving them, as well as when they are perceived in conditions where they do not *appear* red, such as by moonlight or under a black light.

Analyzing sensory properties as ontologically dependent on the *hypothetical* responses of normal humans would avoid the difficulties that attend dependence on *actual* responses. But allowing that the responses in question ought to be construed as the hypothetical responses of normal humans does not yet establish that sensory properties are in fact ontologically dependent upon such responses; they may be only epistemically or conceptually dependent. I next consider the version of response-dependence Zangwill uses, which is derived from Colin McGinn's treatment of secondary properties as relations between objects and responses.

IV. ARE DISPOSITIONS RELATIONS?

Relations are arguably ontologically dependent on their relata; if sensory properties were relations between objects and our responses, they would be mind-dependent in the ontological sense Zangwill needs. Zangwill thus references Colin McGinn's account, according to which

it is ... entirely proper to speak of objects as red with respect to perceiver *x* and green with respect to perceiver *y* ... it is just to say that what it is for a secondary quality to be instantiated is for a certain relation to obtain between the object and some chosen group of perceivers.^{xi}

McGinn actually makes two claims about the relational nature of sensory properties in this passage: that they are relative to the perceivers in question, and that they are instantiated as relations between the object and the perceivers in question. I shall respond with a qualified acceptance of the relativity claim and then dispute the instantiation claim.

McGinn takes it to be an immediate consequence of a dispositional analysis that colors (and all other sensory properties, presumably) are subjective in a specific sense, namely that their analysis involves personal experience: “to grasp the concept of red it is necessary to know what it is for something to look red,” and “this knowledge is available only to one who enjoys those kinds of experiences ... sensory experiences which we have only from the first-person perspective.”^{xiii} What it means to be red depends on the way we experience red things, and sensory properties are thus conceptually dependent on responses. Because the meaning of ‘red’ depends on what *human* responses are like, what red means is relative to the responses of *normal perceivers under normal conditions*. To argue, as Zangwill does, that we could not fault beings with perceptual mechanisms unlike our own for applying color concepts in a systematically different fashion is only to argue that the color concepts are relative and conceptually response-dependent. But this conceptual dependence does not bring with it the needed ontological dependence; it is a further step to claim that the very existence of sensory properties is relative to human responses. My acceptance of this relativity claim is thus qualified because I do not agree that it leads to ontological dependence.^{xiii}

So much for the relativity claim, but what of the instantiation claim? Are secondary qualities indeed instantiated as relations between objects and perceivers, in the form of experiences such as color sensations? My response here is to argue that when we analyze sensory properties (or any other properties) as dispositions, we must be careful to distinguish between the disposition, its manifestation, and the conditions under which the disposition manifests itself. Confusing any two of these elements in a dispositional analysis leads to problems. To take the disposition of fragility as an example, we say that an object is fragile if we expect it to break upon being dropped; this is most naturally understood as meaning that the object has some property in virtue of which it will break when dropped or knocked. When a glass is dropped and breaks, the breaking event is the manifestation of its fragility, but that should not be conflated with the dropping event that causes it; the dropping is a condition of manifestation, not the manifestation itself. In the case of color perception, the use of one’s color vision and the appropriate lighting are both conditions for the manifestation of color, which is the perceiver’s response.

Not only should the manifestation be distinguished from the conditions of manifestation, it should also be carefully distinguished from the disposition itself. As a dispositional realist, I hold that the existence of a disposition is distinct from and in no way ontologically dependent upon the existence of its manifestation. Stephen Mumford’s X-ray example supports this position: objects did not suddenly gain new powers to produce X-ray images when X-ray machines were invented; rather, a condition of manifestation was met. The objects would have the disposition to produce X-ray images regardless of whether the machine had been invented, though we could not have had concepts or knowledge of X-ray images.^{xiv} In the case of physical dispositions like fragility, it is obvious to the casual observer that the glass’s fragility is distinct from any breaking event that happens to it. In the case of sense perception, however, the manifestation events take place in perceivers, and this fact together with a peculiarity of our language leads to some ambiguity when we use color terms.

If we are to analyze colors and other sensory properties dispositionally, as I have described, we need to distinguish between color dispositions and color manifestations: by ‘red’ we might refer to the causal power that things like fire engines have to produce a certain sort of sensation, *or* we might refer to the type of sensation itself. My own practice is to reserve the term ‘red’ for the causal powers that actually belong to objects, and to speak of the manifestation of such dispositions as red-sensations, recognizing that these latter entities are properties of perceivers and (ontologically) mind-dependent. This use of the term allows me to maintain that it is objects,

rather than perceivers, that have the property of redness. Keeping this distinction in mind, we begin to see the difficulty inherent in the secondary quality account used by McGinn and Zangwill: while a dispositional analysis of color and other sensory properties involves an important causal relation between the sensory properties and perceivers' responses, the relation is only a potential one until manifestation occurs. The disposition to produce such responses exists independently of its manifestation, and so long as we agree that by color we mean a disposition of the object, we cannot claim that colors are ontologically response-dependent; the same will hold true for other sensory properties.

V. RIGIDITY AND INTRINSIC VS. EXTRINSIC DISPOSITIONS

In closing, I shall look at two features of Zangwill's response-dependence account of sensory properties and examine their consequences for the question of realism about aesthetic properties. The two features I am interested in are his treatment of sensory properties as extrinsic rather than intrinsic dispositions and the resulting nonrigidity of sensory properties, which on his account vary with perceivers' responses.

I am suspicious of so-called extrinsic dispositions because I find that they are too easily reducible to intrinsic ones. If we allow that a key has, intrinsically, a general power to open locks of a certain structure and composition, then any so-called extrinsic power of the key to open *this* particular lock is surely reducible to the intrinsic power already described. The power to open *this* particular lock can be gained and lost with no alteration in the key's intrinsic powers, and as such should be regarded as a mere-Cambridge property.^{xv} If my suspicions are correct, what we are left with is a merely conceptual sense of 'extrinsic' and not a metaphysical difference after all.^{xvi} But I think this amounts to no more than McGinn's relativity claim, which I discussed and accepted earlier.

The nonrigidity that characterizes Zangwill's response-dependence is a result of his treatment of sensory properties as extrinsic properties, where what it is to be red, loud, pungent, or sweet is determined by both the intrinsic properties of objects and by our responses to them. Simply put, if perceivers' responses vary across possible worlds, then there is variation rather than rigidity regarding what color concepts pick out across worlds. Because I am skeptical about so-called extrinsic properties, I do not think we are forced to accept that the actual powers of objects vary across possible worlds that have varying responses. I do not see how variations in our responses lead to variations in the actual causal powers of objects, which I have argued exist independently of both their conditions of manifestation and the occurrence of manifestations.

If one wishes to give an account of aesthetic properties in which they genuinely belong to objects (in order to account for the normative elements of aesthetic discourse, for instance), then Zangwill's sensory property mind-dependence will be particularly troubling. Making aesthetic properties supervenient on properties that are themselves mind-dependent precludes the possibility of a realist account, as Zangwill recognizes. But Zangwill's argument does not succeed in establishing the ontological response-dependence for sensory properties that would make them mind-dependent. Further, the possibility remains that we can give a dispositional account of sensory and aesthetic properties according to which they are real properties of objects.

To conclude, then, Zangwill's argument for nonrealism about aesthetic properties depends for success on his nonrealism about sensory properties. But his case for nonrealism about sensory properties falls prey to a confusion of dispositions with their manifestations and moves too quickly from a conceptual version of response-dependence to a claim about ontological response-

dependence that is not justified, I have argued. If aesthetic properties are indeed subjective and mind-dependent, it will be for reasons other than their supervenience on sensory properties.

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1. Nick Zangwill, *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 187.
 2. For the purposes of this paper, I shall use ‘dispositions’ and ‘powers’ interchangeably.
 3. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. II, Ch. VIII, § 20–25.
 4. For the dispositionalist, Locke’s secondary qualities are powers to cause perception; his tertiary qualities are powers to effect changes in other objects.
 5. A glass, for the dispositional realist, does not suddenly become fragile upon being dropped; rather, it is fragile all along and would be so even if it were never dropped at all. Similarly, if colors are dispositions, then red things will be red even if no one ever experiences them as such.
 6. Zangwill, *Metaphysics of Beauty*, 186.
 7. A fourth possibility would be that of logical dependence, but as E. J. Lowe says, “Logical relations, strictly speaking, can obtain only between propositions, not between concrete objects, nor between abstract objects that are not propositional in nature.” See his 2005 entry, “Ontological Dependence,” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2008 edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/dependence-ontological/>.
 8. These examples are borrowed from Lowe, “Ontological Dependence,” and his article, “Some Formal Ontological Relations,” *Dialectica* 58, no. 3 (2004), 297–316.
 9. James Van Cleve, “Dependence” in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 191–93.
 10. Zangwill, *Metaphysics of Beauty*, 188.
 11. Colin McGinn, *The Subjective View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 10.
 12. *Ibid.*, *Subjective View*, 8–9.
 13. A second qualification I would add here is that it is not just sensory properties that turn out to be relative when understood as dispositions. Our concepts of physical dispositions like fragility are also relative to “normal conditions” (though perceivers and their responses are not typically involved in the conditions). We use ‘fragile’ for things that are easily broken or destroyed under normal conditions; although marshmallows shatter easily after being frozen in liquid nitrogen, they are only fragile in this relative sense.
 14. Stephen Mumford, *Dispositions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 56.
 15. See P. T. Geach’s *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge, 1969) for the origination of the term “mere-Cambridge” for referring to properties and changes.
 16. See Sydney Shoemaker’s comment on the intrinsic vs. extrinsic powers of a key in his “Causal and Metaphysical Necessity,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (1998), 65.

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