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## ANALYTICAL DISPOSITIONALISM AND PRACTICAL REASON

**ABSTRACT.** The paper examines the plausibility of analytical dispositionalism about practical reason, according to which the following claims are conceptual truths about common sense ethical discourse: i) *Ethics*: agents have reasons to act in some ways rather than others, and ii) *Metaphysical Modesty*: there is no such thing as a response independent normative reality. By elucidating two uncontroversial assumptions which are fundamental to the common sense commitment to *ethics*, I argue that common sense ethical discourse is most plausibly construed as committed to the denial of *metaphysical modesty*, and thereby as committed to the existence of a response independent normative reality.

**KEY WORDS:** conceptual analysis, dispositionalism, metaphysical revision, normative reasons, practical reason

### 1. ETHICS AND METAPHYSICAL MODESTY

According to analytical dispositionalism about practical reason, the conjunction of the following two theses is a conceptual truth about common-sense ethical discourse:

- (E) *Agents have reasons to act in some ways rather than others, and*
- (M) *There is no such thing as a response independent normative reality.*

I refer to (E) as *ethics*. To endorse ethics is to endorse the claim that some reasons are *good* reasons on which agents *ought* to act. I refer to such reasons as *normative reasons*. The possibility of sound ethical argument presupposes that there are normative reasons. When Amnesty International argue that we should act to abolish the torture of political dissidents, for example, they are making a normative claim on us. In effect, they are claiming that there are reasons (perhaps moral reasons) to abolish the torture of political dissidents. To give up one's commitment to ethics is to renounce the idea that any such claims are sound, and consequently to renounce one's own ethical judgements, insofar as they contain a commitment to ethics.

I refer to (M) as *metaphysical modesty*. To endorse metaphysical modesty is to endorse the claim that even if agents have reasons to act in some ways rather than others, and even if these reasons obtain independently



of agents' *actual* responses to different situations, these reasons do not obtain independently of agents' *best counterfactual* responses to different situations. More specifically, truths about agents' normative reasons are *response dependent* in the sense that the truth of normative reason attributions is determined by how agents would respond to given ends in some set of *favourable* circumstances, where the notion of a favourable circumstance is not cashed out trivially as a circumstance conducive to the endorsement of independently reason giving ends.<sup>1</sup> Thus, normative reason attributions can be true or false, depending on whether their content matches that of the beliefs or desires of agents in favourable circumstances.<sup>2</sup> According to analytical dispositionalism as I shall understand it, common-sense judgements which attribute normative reasons to agents carry a conceptual commitment to response dependence.<sup>3</sup> Common-sense attributions of normative reasons do not involve us in the metaphysically immodest and potentially erroneous commitment to the existence of a response independent normative reality, but are rather claims the underlying commitments of which reveal a dependence of normative reasons on the actual or counterfactual responses of agents in some set of normatively privileged circumstances.

This paper examines the conjunction of ethics and metaphysical modesty at the level of common-sense conceptual commitment and argues that analytical dispositionalism is unfounded. By elucidating two uncontroversial

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<sup>1</sup>For the notion of response dependence and its application in ethics and elsewhere, see Johnston (1993). For the purposes of this paper, I shall take rejection of metaphysical modesty in ethics as the claim that normative reasons obtain in virtue of the intrinsic nature of ends, and therefore independently of which circumstances any given set of ends would be favourably responded to by any given set of agents. I call this position *normative realism*. There is a weaker sense in which normative realism does not entail that reasons are response independent. Normative reasons are reasons to pursue *ends*, where ends are definable as objects of possible desire, and therefore in terms of what agents can respond to. In this sense normative realism is compatible with response dependence. This form of response dependence should not be confused with the response dependence of normative reasons on agents' responses to ends in *favourable* circumstances.

<sup>2</sup>Some writers take possession of this feature to qualify ethics for a metaphysically modest realism. See e.g. Smith (1994). I reserve the term 'realism' for the response independent construal of normative reasons.

<sup>3</sup>For a statement of analytical dispositionalism, see Smith (1994, pp. 151–77) and Jackson (1998, Chapters 5–6). Smith's view can be traced back to Harman (1975). Versions of dispositionalism are also defended in Williams (1981) and Korsgaard (1996), although neither of these writers are obviously making the analytical claims about common-sense conceptual commitment which are at issue here.

assumptions which are fundamental to our common-sense commitment to ethics, I argue that common-sense discourse about normative reasons is most plausibly construed as committed to the *denial* of metaphysical modesty, and thus to the existence of a response independent normative reality. This is not an original claim. But it is a claim worthy of restatement in the context of contemporary meta-ethical debate, in which its philosophical significance does not appear to be well understood. For, as I shall argue, it follows from this claim that the only viable form of dispositionalism about normative reasons is a view within *revisionary metaphysics*, not within *conceptual analysis*. I end the paper by drawing a methodological lesson from this conclusion.

## 2. ANALYTICAL DISPOSITIONALISM

According to the analytical dispositionalist, facts about normative reasons are determined by facts about how agents would act, judge or be motivated in certain circumstances. These are supposedly metaphysically unmysterious facts which do not entail the existence of the platonic forms or eternal fitnesses allegedly postulated by the normative realist.<sup>4</sup> Hence the dispositionalist claim to metaphysical modesty.

One familiar form of dispositionalism asserts that what agents have normative reasons to do is determined by what they presently desire. This view is the normative extension of what is known as *the Humean theory of Motivation*.<sup>5</sup> On this view, desires bring reasons into existence by bringing intelligible purposes into existence. To be a rational agent is to have desires, and to pursue those desires in accordance with one's beliefs, thereby forming new desires which can then be pursued in accordance with one's beliefs.<sup>6</sup> To each desire there corresponds an *end* which specifies the

<sup>4</sup>For the mystery of the notion of an independent normative reality, see Mackie (1977, pp.1–49). For the move from such scepticism towards a dispositionalist account, see Johnston (1993, pp. 102ff.) and Jackson (1998, Chapters 5–6). It is a pertinent question whether the candidacy of conditions of circumstance to confer ends with reason giving force is *itself* determined by agents' responses to those conditions in favourable circumstances. If not, any metaphysical modesty gained at the level of ends would be lost at the level of agents' responses. I leave that question for another occasion.

<sup>5</sup>For the Humean theory of motivation, see Davidson (1980, pp. 3–19). It is a disputed question what exactly this view has got to do with Hume.

<sup>6</sup>This view is compatible with, but does not entail, that rational agency can produce new *intrinsic* desires.

content of that desire. This desire can be promoted provided the agent has an appropriate means-end belief, the end of which is identical to the content of the desire and the means of which is some possible action which the agent thinks will promote the end. When suitably combined, and in suitable circumstances, such belief-desire pairs can motivate agents to act. I refer to such belief-desire pairs as *motivating reasons*. Motivating reasons provide teleological and instrumentally rationalistic explanations of agents' actions.

The most primitive version of dispositionalism claims that an agent's normative reasons are directly determined by his motivating reasons. What you have reasons to do is what would, in fact, promote the satisfaction of your present desires. I refer to this view as *instrumentalism*. According to instrumentalism (I),

(I) *An agent has a reason to promote some end if and only if promoting that end would tend towards the satisfaction of one of his present desires.*

More sophisticated versions of dispositionalism loosen the tie between normative reasons and present desire and postulate more demanding constraints on reason giving ends. Thus, an analytical version of the view associated with Williams would claim that what you have reasons to do is determined by what you would desire to do were you to know all the relevant facts and exercise your imagination.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Smith has proposed an analysis, building on an earlier view of Harman's, according to which your reasons are determined by what you would want yourself to do in your present circumstances were you to find yourself in conditions of full information and in a state of reflective equilibrium.<sup>8</sup> A dispositionalist of Kantian bent might offer an analysis whereby your reasons are determined by what you would desire in conditions of autonomy.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, an Aristotelian dispositionalist might suggest that your reasons are determined by what you would favour if you have been educated in a certain way.<sup>10</sup> Construed as versions of analytical dispositionalism, all these theories share the following feature with instrumentalism: what agents have reasons to do is determined by some set of agents' responses in some set of appropriate circumstances, actual or counterfactual. What you have

<sup>7</sup>See Williams (1981, pp. 101–13). Although Williams *argues* only for the claim that the conditions cited are necessary, he *claims* that they are also sufficient. See Williams (1995, pp. 35–6).

<sup>8</sup>See Harman (1975) and Smith (1995).

<sup>9</sup>For Kantian dispositionalism, see e.g. Korsgaard (1996).

<sup>10</sup>For Aristotelian dispositionalism, see e.g. McDowell (1995).

reasons to do is what such agents would favour in those circumstances, *whatever that may be*. The dispositionalist will therefore endorse the following biconditional (D):

(D) *An agent has a reason to promote some end if and only if that end would be favoured in some privileged set of circumstances.*

The analytical dispositionalist adds that this is true *a priori*: a conceptual truth about common-sense ethical discourse.

### 3. THE CONCEPTUAL CORE OF ETHICS

Analytical dispositionalism claims to capture the commitments embedded in common-sense ethical discourse. I refer to these commitments as *the conceptual core* of ethics.<sup>11</sup> According to the currently most popular construal of this notion, the conceptual core of a discourse consists of claims the individual endorsement of which is a necessary condition for having an operative grasp of concepts within that discourse.<sup>12</sup> The claims which constitute the conceptual core of a discourse need not be explicitly endorsed by those who grasp the relevant concepts. They may also be implicit beliefs the endorsement of which is revealed by how the beliefs guide speakers in their application of the relevant concepts. Thus, in order to grasp ethical concepts, for example, it is trivially necessary to accept, either explicitly or implicitly, that ethics commits us to the claim that agents have reasons to act in some ways rather than others.

What else does the conceptual core of ethics commit us to? How are we supposed to find out? One seemingly straightforward method has been proposed, namely to produce a list of the universally endorsed *platitudes* of ethical discourse, i.e. claims that could not be denied by anyone we would count as participating in the practice of making ethical judge-

<sup>11</sup>It might be questioned to what extent there really is such a thing as *the* conceptual core of ethics. We can ignore this question. If the analytical dispositionalist can help himself to the platitudes of common sense, then so can we.

<sup>12</sup>For a general statement of this view, see Jackson (1998, p. 31–37). For its application to ethics, see Smith (1994, p. 29ff.) and Jackson (1998, Chapters 5–6). I take the notion ‘operative grasp’ to be consistent with the possibility that an agent may on reflection come to reject either a whole or a part of the conceptual core of some discourse, while retaining a grasp of concepts within that discourse. We need not be literally committed to the conceptual core of astrological discourse in order to understand it perfectly well.

ments.<sup>13</sup> Some of these claims will be made explicitly. Others will have to be read off from the judgements of competent speakers as implicit commitments guiding their ethical judgements. In either case, speakers' actual ethical classifications are reliable indicators of the conceptual core, barring the interference of confused thinking and the like.<sup>14</sup> It does not matter whether the classifications made actually answer to anything in reality. What matters is that everybody engaged in the practice would be disposed to make them as a matter of course. Analytical dispositionalism so understood postulates an evidential link between the substantial commitments of common sense ethical discourse and the analytical task of mapping the metaphysical assumptions embedded in those commitments. For on this view, there is nothing more to these metaphysical assumptions than is revealed by agents' dispositions to make or withhold reason attributions in different circumstances. We can therefore test the plausibility of analytical dispositionalism by checking it for consistency with the platitudes which make up the conceptual core of ethics.

#### 4. CONDITIONS OF CIRCUMSTANCES AND CONDITIONS OF CONTENT

What do we commit ourselves to when we think agents have reasons to act in some ways rather than others? In effect, we are excluding possibilities from a privileged class of *reason giving* options. There are two kinds of criteria by which we effect this exclusion. I refer to the first as *criteria of circumstance* and to the second as *criteria of content*. Both kinds of criteria are platitudinously employed in common sense ethical discourse.

Our common-sense commitment to ethics is partly due to the fact that we make normative distinctions between circumstances in which projects are formed, maintained, or judged to be appropriate. Suppose you form the desire to set fire to your house which has your whole family in it. You

<sup>13</sup>Some dispositionalists would say 'could not be *consistently* denied'. For an explicit commitment to a consistency constraint on conceptual analysis, see Jackson (1998, p. 36). For Jackson, this potentially revisionary element of analysis appears to derive from the fact that the value of analysis consists in its contribution to serious metaphysics. The revisionary element which I attribute to analytical dispositionalism below could be assimilated to the formal kind exemplified by Jackson's consistency constraint *if* the notion of an independent normative reality could be shown to be inconsistent rather than merely obscure. Even so, the main thesis of this paper would still hold. For in that case, although dispositionalism would in *one* sense be true at the level of analysis, it would be so only in its capacity as a doctrine within *revisionary metaphysics*.

<sup>14</sup>For a list of suggested defeasibility conditions, see Jackson (1998, pp. 35–6).

may falsely believe that the house is empty. You may have been brain-washed into having this desire by someone who stands to benefit from the insurance money. You may accidentally have consumed some mind-altering drug. Or perhaps you just have not thought about whether it is a good idea to burn your house down. In each case, we are inclined to say that the conditions of desire possession undermine the claim that you have a normative reason to pursue your end. Our application of conditions of circumstance commits us to the following claim (CCI):

*(CCI) An agent has a reason to promote some end only if that end would be favoured in some appropriate set of circumstances.*

Thus, the conceptual core of ethics commits us to the claim that only ends favoured by desires which satisfy conditions relating to their possession provide normative reasons.

Our commitment to ethics also derives from the fact that it matters to our assessment of projects what those projects are. Suppose you desire to burn your house down, only now with the considered intention of its going up in flames with your whole family in it. Even so, we may be inclined to deny that you have a normative reason to promote the satisfaction of this desire, on the grounds that the desire itself is destructive or evil. There are many examples of desires being ruled out as unsuited to provide reasons in virtue of their content. First, some desires are for ends which it is impossible either to realise or pursue. Should I square the circle? Second, some ends are such that no value can intelligibly be assigned either to their pursuit or to their realisation. Should I devote my life to the collection of saucers of mud? Third, some ends have no non-arbitrary distinguishing properties which account for why one should pursue them rather than different ends. Should I be indifferent to next-Tuesdays? Finally, some ends seem obviously insane, evil or perverse. Should I instigate a universal holocaust? In at least some of these cases we want to say that the ends in question are intrinsically such as to undermine the claim that there are normative reasons to pursue them. Our application of conditions of content commits us to the following claim (CCO):

*(CCO) An agent has a reason to promote some end only if that end is of some appropriate kind.*

Thus, the conceptual core of ethics commits us to the claim that only desires with the appropriate contents provide normative reasons.

If conditions of circumstance and conditions of content belong to the conceptual core of ethics, a commitment to these conditions should be

detectable in the ethical responses of agents beyond the seminar-room. The only way to discover if this is so is to undertake an empirical survey. This survey would, as a piece of conceptual sociology, have to meet the standards of any sociological survey, and its conclusions would quantify over specific times and places. There need be no expectation that the Muslims in the coffee-shops of ancient Byzantium and the Vikings who visited there 1000 years ago would fix on the same conceptual core as the inhabitants of contemporary Istanbul. Moral philosophers do not tend to undertake such surveys. Instead we make do with case by case appeals to the ethical intuitions of philosophers and their acquaintances, on the assumption that these form a representative sample of the conceptual community under scrutiny.<sup>15</sup> On this limited evidence, there is firm support for the claim that the conceptual core of ethics includes a commitment both to conditions of circumstance and to conditions of content. Not only are both kinds of criteria ubiquitously employed, implicitly or explicitly, in ethical theory and moral practice. There is also evidence that common sense does not regard either criterion as more fundamental than the other. For although we frequently apply conditions of circumstance in order to fix on conditions of content, we also frequently apply conditions of content in order to fix on conditions of circumstance.<sup>16</sup> There is little evidence that either conditions of circumstance or conditions of content are regarded by common sense as more fundamental than the other, either implicitly or explicitly. In fact, based on the informal responses of a small sample of mature subjects presented with cases where conditions of circumstance and conditions of content are in apparent conflict, I have found some evidence which suggests that conditions of content may be regarded as more fundamental than conditions of circumstance, the thought being that even agents in favourable circumstances might be mistaken, and consequently come to endorse the wrong ends.<sup>17</sup> In what follows, I shall ignore this

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<sup>15</sup>See Jackson (1998, pp. 36–7).

<sup>16</sup>For an example of the first, consider an employee who wonders whether she had a reason to scream at her boss. First, she might ask whether she would have screamed at her boss if she had not been so tired, thereby using conditions of circumstance in order to fix on conditions of content. But equally, she might use conditions of content in order to fix on conditions of circumstance by asking whether she should stop making major decisions when she is tired, since she always ends up screaming at people when she does.

<sup>17</sup>My limited sample consists of no more than 50 individuals, from two European countries, comprising both philosophers and non-philosophers, and questioned over a two-month period in 1997. The subjects were asked to respond to cases of potential conflict between conditions of circumstance and conditions of content, and invited to make a judgement regarding the relative priority of each criterion.

complication and assume, for the sake of argument, that the conceptual core of ethics is committed to the following biconditional (CCE):

(CCE) *An agent has a reason to promote some end if and only if that end would be favoured in some appropriate set of circumstances, and if that end is of some appropriate kind.*

## 5. AGAINST ANALYTICAL DISPOSITIONALISM

Is analytical dispositionalism consistent with the conceptual core of ethics? If the argument of Section 4 is correct, the answer appears to be no. To see this, first consider dispositionalism in its simplest form, namely instrumentalism. Instrumentalism attributes normative reasons corresponding to any actual desire, regardless of the circumstances in which it is favoured, and regardless of what it is for. Instrumentalism therefore fails to meet both the criteria of circumstance and content to which common-sense commits us. If we accept instrumentalism, therefore, we are committed to a radical rethink of the conceptual core of ethics.<sup>18</sup>

Instrumentalism is only the most primitive form of dispositionalism. More sophisticated versions are consistent with the common sense application of (CCI), provided they succeed in picking out the conditions of rational desire possession to which common-sense commits us. In fact, since there exists a version of dispositionalism corresponding to every possible combination of conditions of circumstance, it follows that analytical dispositionalism is in principle adequate to that part of the conceptual core which depends on (CCI).

But analytical dispositionalism does not seem adequate to the part of the conceptual core which depends on (CCO). Consider once more the instrumentalist view. For the instrumentalist, what determines whether you have reason to pursue some end is whether that end is an object of your desire or a means to the pursuit of such an object. This is purely a matter of the relation in which this end stands to you and has nothing to do with what that end is. In other words, it has nothing to do with the content of your desire. *Qua* ends, all ends are rationally on a par.

The same is true of more sophisticated versions of analytical dispositionalism. For the dispositionalist, what determines whether you have

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<sup>18</sup>There is evidence that this is the position of some friends of instrumentalism. See e.g. Gauthier (1986, Chapter 1), whose motivation for adopting an instrumentalist framework is partly sceptical.

a reason to pursue some end is whether you would stand in some particular relation of endorsement to that end in some appropriate set of circumstances. Again, this is purely a matter of the relation in which the end stands to you and need have nothing to do with what that end is. In other words, it need have nothing to do with the content of your desires. *Qua* ends, all ends are rationally on a par.

By (CCO), the conceptual core is inconsistent with the claim that all ends are rationally on a par *qua* ends. It is a necessary condition for an end to be rational that it is of the appropriate intrinsic kind. It follows that it is not sufficient for an end to be rational that it be favoured in privileged circumstances. This contradicts the dispositionalist claim (D), which construes the satisfaction of conditions of circumstance as both necessary and sufficient for ends being rational.

To illustrate the argument for the insufficiency of conditions of circumstance, consider the popular claim that there is a reason to pursue an end if and only if that end would be favoured in a state of reflective equilibrium. Suppose we came to think that in a state of reflective equilibrium we would favour a universal holocaust.<sup>19</sup> Do we think this should make us favour a universal holocaust rather than reject the claim that we have a reason to pursue whatever ends would be favoured in reflective equilibrium? I think not. Furthermore, even if we were able to revise our favoured conception of conditions of circumstance so as to rule out the endorsement of a universal holocaust, this need not necessarily further affect our initial rejection of the claim that we have normative reasons to instigate a universal holocaust. On the contrary, reflection on this and similar examples reveals a deeply rooted assumption that some acts, universal holocausts included, would not be made rational merely by the fact that we would favour them in some putatively privileged circumstance. It also

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<sup>19</sup>Some might think it is inconceivable that anyone could favour a universal holocaust in a state of reflective equilibrium. I'm not so sure. On a *conservative* conception of reflective equilibrium whereby the initial state of beliefs and intrinsic desires constrains the coherentist process which issues in reflective equilibrium, an agent might clearly favour a universal holocaust in reflective equilibrium provided he started off with a set of sufficiently twisted beliefs and desires. For such a view, see Harman (1975). On a *non-conservative* conception on which the coherentist process is compatible with revision of the entire initial state of beliefs and desires, it is unclear why an agent could not come to favour a universal holocaust in reflective equilibrium provided he underwent a set of suitably bizarre and morally undermining experiences. Could 'we' come to favour a universal holocaust in reflective equilibrium? On a conservative conception, most of us could probably not. On a non-conservative conception, who knows? On the vagaries of the notion of a reflective equilibrium, see Raz (1982).

matters intrinsically *what* we would favour in that circumstance. The dispositionalist cannot take this assumption at face value, since for him all ends are rationally on a par *qua* ends.<sup>20</sup>

It follows that analytical dispositionalism is inconsistent with (CCO), and thus with the conceptual core of ethics. This should come as no surprise. For if some ends provide normative reasons just in virtue of being the ends they are, then some ends are rational to pursue regardless of in which circumstances they would be favoured. This claim seems paramount to the denial of response dependence, and thereby of the metaphysical modesty which dispositionalism putatively exemplifies.

## 6. ALTERNATIVE DISPOSITIONALIST STRATEGIES

There are three simple objections which the analytical dispositionalist might make to the preceding argument. First, the analytical dispositionalist might argue that conditions of circumstance should be construed *substantively*, thus incorporating conditions of content.<sup>21</sup> Thus, he might claim that only those conditions of desire formation are appropriate in which agents would favour the right sorts of ends. Second, the dispositionalist might accept conditions of content as part of the conceptual core, but argue that the common sense commitment to conditions of content is derivable from the common sense commitment to conditions of circumstance. Thus, he might claim that what the conceptual core of ethics really commits us to is the claim that agents should regard some ends as

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<sup>20</sup>In what follows, I shall ignore one further complication which arises from the suggestion that conditions of content might obtain consistently with the truth of the dispositionalist's *necessary* condition. According to this suggestion, the nature of an end does make some intrinsic difference to whether there is a reason to pursue it, but the reason giving force of that end is also constrained by whether agents would favour it in privileged circumstances. Even if consistent, I fail to see that this scenario provides any support for analytical dispositionalism. First, the rejection of the dispositionalist *sufficient* condition is inconsistent with metaphysical modesty. Second, the claim that the nature of an end makes an intrinsic difference to the reason giving force of that end is also in potential conflict with the dispositionalist's *necessary* condition. Reflection on the example of the end of *preventing* a universal holocaust provides further grounds for thinking that even the dispositionalist's necessary condition is in conflict with the conceptual core, the thought being that the conceptual core entails that the intrinsic nature of at least *some* ends is *sufficient* to qualify them as providers of normative reasons. If so, analytical dispositionalism is further undermined.

<sup>21</sup>This view might be suggested by remarks to the effect that morally right ends have to be of some 'appropriate substantive kind'. See e.g. Smith (1994, p. 184).

intrinsically reason giving because fully rational agents would desire that they so regard them in favourable circumstances. Third, he might argue that dispositionalism can capture the conditions of content embedded in the conceptual core by defining a coextensive set of conditions of circumstance. I find none of these responses convincing.

The defect of the first strategy emerges once we ask what is implied by a substantive construal of conditions of circumstance. To make this claim is to endorse the anti-reductionist thesis that conditions of circumstance are constrained by conditions of content, and thus that our commitment to the latter cannot be analysed in terms of our commitment to the former.<sup>22</sup> In effect, those circumstances of response are appropriate which lead to the endorsement of ends independently assumed to be reason giving. This is not a strategy which the analytical dispositionalist can avail himself of consistently with his endorsement of metaphysical modesty. For the irreducibility of conditions of content to conditions of circumstance entails that the conceptual core is committed to the claim that some ends are reason giving in virtue of being the ends they are, and thereby to the existence of a response independent normative reality. It is therefore inconsistent for the analytical dispositionalist to constrain conditions of circumstance by conditions of content. Analytical dispositionalism cannot then be regarded as a conceptual truth about ethics.

According to the first dispositionalist response, conditions of circumstance are parasitic on conditions of content. The second dispositionalist response reverses this order of dependence and derives conditions of content from conditions of circumstance. This latter response avoids the problem as originally posed by attributing rather more subtlety to the conceptual core than is indicated by the claim that we think it matters to the rationality of an end what that end is. The analytical dispositionalist might argue that the existence of conditions of content is consistent with metaphysical modesty, provided agents in favourable circumstances would be favourably disposed towards the disposition to reason in accordance with conditions of content. In that case, one might think, what the conceptual core commits us to is some such claim as that we should observe conditions of content because we would want ourselves to observe conditions of content if we were fully rational.<sup>23</sup> On this view, we are not committed to the existence of a response independent normative reality after all, but are rather committed to reasoning *as if* there was.

While this dispositionalist response succeeds in picking out a consistent set of metaphysical commitments, it does not pick out the metaphysical

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<sup>22</sup>For an analogous claim about value, see Wright (1988, p. 18ff.).

<sup>23</sup>For remarks suggestive of this view, see Smith (1995, p. 110ff.).

commitments of the conceptual core of ethics. There is no evidence to suggest that the conceptual core includes, either implicitly or explicitly, the higher-order claim that conditions of content are to be applied on the condition that they would be favoured by agents in favourable circumstances. On the contrary, our common sense commitment to conditions of content is independent of our commitment to any condition of circumstance of whatever order. To see this, suppose, once more, that the conceptual core commits us to the claim that there are no normative reasons to instigate a universal holocaust. The higher-order dispositionalist will construe this commitment as follows, namely that people should treat the end of instigating a universal holocaust as incapable of providing normative reasons to pursue it independently of the circumstances in which they might be favourably disposed towards it, because in privileged circumstances agents would be favourably disposed towards their treating a universal holocaust as not providing reasons to pursue it independently of the circumstances in which they would be favourably disposed towards it. But this claim is so far removed from the conceptual core of ethics as to be intuitively dubious. The basic thought which guides the common-sense ethical belief that one should regard the end of instigating a universal holocaust as unsuited to provide reasons to pursue it is some simple claim such as that a universal holocaust consists in the destruction of all valuable life, and that as such it is intrinsically an end to be avoided. Such basic thoughts can, and generally do, obtain quite independently of any further commitment to the endorsement of conditions of content in higher-order conditions of circumstance. We should therefore conclude that the nature of the ends to be pursued matters intrinsically to the common-sense assessment of agents' projects quite independently of any circumstances *of any order* in which either they or their unconditional endorsement might be favourably assessed.

This is not to deny that agents might come to endorse the higher-order dispositionalist claim as a result of reflection. You might, for example, come to endorse the higher-order claim on reflection because you find the notion of irreducible conditions of content metaphysically dubious. But this would not show that your antecedent common-sense ethical judgements were constitutively committed to a merely conditional acceptance of conditions of content, and does not, therefore, lend any support to analytical dispositionalism.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Why should we assume that the analytical dispositionalist must resort to the attribution of higher-order commitments in order to evade the argument from (CCO)? Because on the conception of analysis on which the present argument is premised, and which paradigm dispositionalists accept, the metaphysical commitments of common sense ethical

According to the third dispositionalist response, the common sense commitment to conditions of content can be captured in terms of a commitment to conditions of circumstance provided we can define a set of conditions of circumstance which is *coextensive* with the set of common sense conditions of content, in the sense of picking out the same ends as reason giving. This claim is also implausible. For the conceptual core of ethics is meant to consist in the commitments which, either implicitly or explicitly, guide our common sense reason attributions. While the fact that we can in principle define a set of conditions of circumstance coextensive with the conceptual core of ethics shows that we *might* have been guided solely by conditions of circumstance, it does not establish that we *are* so guided. I argued in Section 4 that we are not so guided. Furthermore, we might also define a set of conditions of content which is in the same sense coextensive with the set of common sense conditions of circumstance. While this shows that we might have been guided solely by conditions of content, it does not establish that we are so guided. I argued in Section 4 that we are not so guided. Our common sense ethical judgements are guided both by conditions of circumstance and by conditions of content. To remove either criterion from the conceptual core would be to substantially revise the metaphysical commitments of that core. Thus, even if we could define a set of conditions of circumstance which yielded all and only the normative reason attributions entailed by the conceptual core, this fact in itself would not undermine the common sense commitment to conditions of content. Quite the contrary. For a careful examination of the process by which the favoured conditions of circumstance were selected would be likely to reveal an implicit commitment to conditions of content.

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discourse can be specified by eliciting the claims which guide competent speakers in their application of ethical concepts. On this conception of analysis, the plausibility of analytical dispositionalism can be assessed by the extent to which the dispositionalist biconditional (D) can be attributed to speakers as a constitutive constraint on their ethical judgements. The central contention of this paper is that (D) is not a constitutive constraint on common sense reason attributions because common sense includes a commitment to claims inconsistent with (D), as given by its implicit recognition of irreducible conditions of content. On a different conception of analysis, the matter might well look rather different. If we take analysis to include an explanation of how reason judgements can have metaphysically respectable truth-conditions, for example, the analytical dispositionalist need not be committed to attribute the higher-order claim to common sense. But then analysis would include what I have defined as revisionary metaphysics. The availability of alternative conceptions of analysis does therefore not undermine the present argument. Another conception of analysis which fails to undermine the present argument is discussed in the main text immediately below.

Analytical dispositionalism is an implausible doctrine about normative reasons. So why has anyone defended it? One explanation might be that the analytical dispositionalist is really a revisionary metaphysician in disguise. If he is, this would not be the first time a metaphysical theory put on the mask of a 'sober logical thesis'.<sup>25</sup> But it would surely be irresponsible to offer this as a universally applicable explanation. In any case, some dispositionalists are quite explicit about the existence of their revisionary motives.<sup>26</sup> A fully comprehensive assessment of dispositionalism would therefore have to include an assessment of the prospects for a revisionary dispositionalist account of normative reasons. Whether revisionary dispositionalism fares any better than analytical dispositionalism will then depend on whether the rational authority of putative conditions of circumstance can be metaphysically vindicated consistently with metaphysical modesty.

#### 7. A METHODOLOGICAL QUESTION

The assessment of revisionary dispositionalism lies beyond the scope of the present paper. But given the implausibility of analytical dispositionalism, we can draw one preliminary methodological conclusion. The revisionary dispositionalist cannot without further argument appeal to the common-sense intuitions embedded in the conceptual core of ethics in order to vindicate some determinate set of circumstances as normatively privileged. For the revisionary dispositionalist is committed to the rejection of part of that core. Once the dispositionalist moves from the conceptual analysis of common sense ethical commitments to a metaphysically motivated revision of those commitments, the evidential weight of the intuitions which constitute the conceptual core of ethics is cast into doubt. Whereas a normative realist might argue that common-sense intuitions are a reliable guide to the nature of an independent normative reality, the dispositionalist has no such luxury. The status of dispositionalist appeals to common-sense intuition is therefore rendered correspondingly obscure.

<sup>25</sup>Harman (1975, p. 4). We find essentially the same strategy in the logical positivists. See e.g. Ayer (1936).

<sup>26</sup>See e.g. Johnston (1993, pp. 102ff). As mentioned in Footnote 13, Jackson is also quite explicit about the existence of revisionary elements within conceptual analysis, even though he sometimes retreats to the seemingly weaker claim that the conceptual analyst is 'seeking the hypothesis that best makes sense of their responses taking into account all the evidence' (Jackson, 1998, p. 36).

This fact has interesting consequences for the assessment of the contemporary debate about practical reason. Much of that debate proceeds by the method of counterexample, where the counterexamples in question consist in straightforward appeals to common-sense ethical intuition. It is fairly obvious that such counterexamples cannot automatically be given evidential weight for or against a revisionary dispositionalist account, since any such account will entail the rejection of a subset of the intuitions which make up the repertory of common-sense based counterexamples. The revisionary dispositionalist therefore needs an account of how to distinguish between intuitions which are, and intuitions which are not, metaphysically respectable. Once this account is provided, however, it should be clear that the evidential weight of metaphysically respectable intuitions derives not from their being *intuitions* but rather from their *metaphysical respectability*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Parts of this material have been presented to the Cambridge University Moral Sciences Club, the Oxford University Wolfson Society, to Departmental Seminars at the University of Sheffield and University College London, and at a graduate session of the Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association at the University of Warwick in 1997. I am grateful for the criticism provided by the audiences there, and for the comments of several anonymous referees. I am also grateful to Hugh Mellor, Alex Oliver, Tom Pink and Peter Smith for some very helpful suggestions, and to Malcolm Budd for spotting a terrible typo. Work for this paper has been supported by a Peterhouse Cambridge Research Studentship and a Jacobsen Research Fellowship in the University of London.

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