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WHY RESPONSE-DEPENDENCE THEORIES OF MORALITY ARE FALSE

ABSTRACT. Many response-dependence theorists equate moral truth with the generation of some affective psychological response: what makes this action wrong, as opposed to right, is that it would cause (or merit) affective response of type R (perhaps under ideal conditions). Since our affective nature is purely contingent, and not necessarily shared by all rational creatures (or even by all humans), response-dependence threatens to lead to relativism. In this paper, I will argue that emotional responses and moral features do not align in the way predicted by the response-dependence theorist who wishes to tie morality to emotional affect. I further argue that since response-dependence accounts that tie morality to any sort of affect (be it an emotion, a desire, a desire to desire, or so on) cannot explain the objectivity and universality of morality; and since we do not need a psychological response to play a truth-constituting role in morality in order to explain the normativity or content of morality, we should reject such response-dependence accounts.

KEY WORDS: affect, disposition, emotion, morality, relativism, response-dependence, value

It is not uncommon for philosophers to hold that affective¹ human responses play what I will call a *truth-determining* role in morality. Many response-dependence theorists² hold that what determines whether an action is right or wrong is whether this action would cause a particular sort of affective response (such as a desire, or an emotion or other feeling) in a human observer under ideal conditions. Thus, these response-dependence theorists equate moral truth with the generation of some affective psychological response: what makes this action wrong, as opposed to right, is that it would cause affective response of type R under ideal conditions.³ For this reason, this meta-ethical view on which the test of moral truth is the gen-

¹To head off confusion, I should note that unlike some, I am using the term ‘affective’ broadly, to mean “pertaining to any sort of non-cognitive state (desires, emotions, etc.)”.

²For examples of response-dependence views of morality, see Wiggins (1987), the Aristotelian Society symposium (1989) with papers by Michael Smith, David Lewis, and Mark Johnston, Brower (1993), and Vallentyne (1996).

³A response-dependence theorist might not endorse this reductive equivalence; one might endorse a non-reductive equivalence: *non-reductive* accounts claim that an action is morally right iff it merits affective response R. I will not discuss these non-reductive accounts, for since they endorse an equivalence containing the normative term ‘merits,’ they do not threaten relativism. Rather, non-reductive response-dependence defines ‘mor-



eration of some response is called a *response-dependent* conception of morality.

It is important to understand what is meant when we say that a given response plays a *truth-determining* role in morality. This is stronger than the claim that the response in question plays a merely constitutive role in morality, for the response can play a constitutive role without playing a truth-determining role. By way of analogy, it has recently been argued⁴ that while we should (pace Kripke) give up on truth conditions for meaning attributions, use is in an important sense constitutive of meaning: that is, it is constitutive of meaning that use is evidence for meaning claims, even if meaning is not use. And so use is constitutive of meaning even if meaning claims are not given truth conditions in terms of use.

Such a truth-determining role is also stronger than a mere equivalence (even a necessary equivalence) between moral truth and the generation of some response. Response-dependence theorists *do* endorse such an equivalence: response-dependence accounts claim that an action is morally right if it causes response R under ideal conditions. But, as we should all know from reading the *Euthyphro*, this type of equivalence is ambiguous between two readings: is the response caused because the action in question is wrong, or is the action wrong because response R is caused? The response-dependence theorist is making the latter claim: the action is wrong because the response in question is caused. That is to say, it is the causing of this response that *makes* the action in question right. This is a form of constitutive relation between moral truth and the generation of some response, but it is not just any constitutive relation: it is a truth-determining relation (and as we saw, a constitutive relation need not be a truth-determining relation).

To continue: many have worried that if moral truth were *determined* by the generation of some affective response, then this would lead to objectionable sorts of moral relativism. After all, our psychology is contingent, and not necessarily shared by all rational creatures, or even by all humans.

ally wrong action" in terms of what rationally *ought* to cause approbation or anger in human beings, etc. Slavery always *merited* our moral outrage, even if there was a time during which most people were incapable of experiencing moral outrage when confronted with slavery. Further, we can argue about whether we ought to be made angry by slavery or desegregation or abortion. Hence, non-reductive formulations of response-dependence will lead to relativism only if we think that different sets of reasons are rationally incommensurable (and perhaps not even then – for an argument that this type of incommensurability does not lead to relativism, see my (2001).

⁴Lance and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1997).

Thus, one might wonder if humans had different affective responses, would that make morality different? Imagine, for example, the possible worlds in which we experience moral emotions or desires under different conditions than in the actual world. Are there possible worlds in which, say, kicking dogs is morally required? It seems likely that there are on this view.⁵

Or imagine an alien race whose psychology differed from our own. This race might have an affective nature very different from ours. But if moral truth is response-dependent, then wouldn't their morality be true-for-them, and ours true-for-us?⁶ Or perhaps we would decide that since this alien race's morality-determining responses were so different from ours, that they weren't practicing morality in the first place, but instead schmorality. Maybe we couldn't engage in moral argumentation; we could only talk past one another. This problem might even arise closer to home. Not all people have the same psychological responses; is morality different for these different people? It is also possible that our responses to various actions vary from culture to culture and from era to era; does this mean that moral truth is itself relative and changeable?

All of these are worries that might legitimately be raised by the truth of response-dependence. Recently, attacks on response-dependence conceptions of morality have taken the form of Moral Twin-Earth style arguments⁷, or arguments that response-dependence cannot account for action from the motive of duty⁸, or that the response-dependence theorist can give no response-dependent account of the circumstances which rationally privilege certain responses.⁹ In this paper, however, I will take a different approach

⁵A common response to this objection has been to say that morality is determined by the set of responses we have in the actual world. I address this strategy in the section "Rigidifying Reference to Actual-World Dispositions."

⁶As John McDowell (1987, p. 8) has put the objection, "different sensibilities cannot be ranked according to whether there are better reasons for one sensibility's response than another's." If your subjective response to pistachio ice cream is one of pleasure, and mine is one of distaste, neither of us is wrong: taste is relative, in this sense.

⁷See, for example, Horgan and Timmons (1991) and Holland (2001).

⁸See Zangwill (2001).

⁹H. Lillehammer (2000) argues that the response-dependence theorist must explain why certain responses are rationally privileged. Lillehammer claims that the obvious answer – that these responses are privileged because they occur in certain rationally privileged circumstances – fails because the response-dependence theorist must claim that the rational privileging of these circumstances is a response-independent fact, a reflection of response-independent normative reality. To give a response-dependent account of why particular circumstances are rationally privileged leads either to an infinite regress or a vicious circularity.

in arguing that response-dependence is not true. I will begin by attacking the most common version of response dependence, the version that gives some emotional response a truth-determining role in morality. I argue that emotional responses and moral features do not align in the way predicted by the response-dependence theorist. We will then discuss a familiar worry that addresses all versions of response-dependence that tie morality to affect, the worry that such response-dependent conceptions of morality tie moral truth to something that is only contingently rational. I will argue that this worry is justified, since the claim that we would be disposed to value the same things under ideal conditions relies on an overly simplistic conception of psychological dispositions. Since the sort of response-dependence accounts of morality discussed here cannot explain the objectivity and universality of morality; and since we do not need a psychological response to play a truth-constituting role in morality in order to explain the normativity or content of morality, we should reject such response-dependence accounts.

One note before continuing: one might construct a response-dependence account according to which the account in question is a non-affective response (such as a judgment, belief, or action). I find such accounts less worrisome than those that attempt to tie morality to an affective response.¹⁰ Hence, the target of this paper will be response-dependence theories that tie morality to some affective response, and all references to response-dependence accounts in this paper will be to those that give affect a truth-determining role in morality.

MAPPING MORALITY ONTO EMOTION

Perhaps the most common version of response-dependence ties moral truth to the generation of some *emotional* response. Let us begin our discussion of response-dependence by examining why this common version cannot be made to work. We will begin our discussion of this objection by distinguishing between morally thin and morally thick concepts. Morally thin

¹⁰I think such accounts are less worrisome because non-affective responses such as beliefs, judgments, and actions, are more obviously in the space of reasons than are affective responses, and hence can more easily be critiqued as rational or irrational. Thus, I suspect (although I will not argue this point here) that such accounts are less likely to lead to relativism: non-affective responses are much more easily criticized as irrational than are affective responses, and so worries about relativism resulting from the contingency of psychology are less prominent.

concepts are those like ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’; thick concepts are, for example, ‘cruel’, ‘kind’, and ‘honest’. The response-dependence theorist is surely not claiming that morally thick concepts are individuated by the affective response they cause or merit. First, it seems likely that our morally thick concepts outnumber our various affective states. Second, it would be odd to claim that, say, instances of theft are individuated by disgust, whereas cruel acts are identified by our experience of outrage, and murder, dishonesty, disloyalty, and hypocrisy are each picked out by some other emotion. There seems to be a significant amount of overlap; for example, it seems that one may appropriately experience anger in response to murder and cruelty. Further, the same sort of immoral act (say theft) may appropriately cause different responses. It may cause anger in one person and disgust in another. Thus, any theory that seeks to individuate morally thick concepts based on the emotions they cause is implausible.

I take it, then, that the response-dependence wants to tie the thin concepts of morally good and morally bad to our affective response. But what affective response is in question? Suppose one person says, “Morally bad actions make me angry”, and another says “Morally bad actions fill me with disgust.” If we want to endorse the equivalence “X is morally right = X causes response R under ideal conditions,” where R is anger, we would have to say that the second person is experiencing the wrong response; she is mistaken. This response seems clearly false to me. Not only do morally bad actions *cause* myriad responses, but there are also numerous different responses that are *appropriate*.¹¹ There is not a single, privileged emotion that is caused by immoral actions; nor is there a single, privileged emotion that is merited by such actions. Many different emotions can be caused or merited by such actions.

Consider an example: when China was more vigorously pursuing eradication of the Tibetan culture, it was not uncommon for Chinese soldiers to kill or imprison the inhabitants of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. After one such incident, in which almost all the members of a monastery had been killed, one of the surviving monks expressed his deep sadness – not sadness over the loss of his colleagues, but sadness at the stain on the souls of the murdering Chinese soldiers.

¹¹Although I am not focusing on non-reductive forms of response-dependence in this paper, I should note that the fact that there are numerous *appropriate* responses raises problems for non-reductive versions of response-dependence that define morality in terms of some emotional response.

Of course, one need not hold a Buddhist cosmology to be made sad by such atrocities. One might merely feel sadness or melancholy when confronted with such evidence of the human capacity for savagery, even if one doesn't pity the murderers (as most of us would not). Or one might experience not sadness, but great anger. One might also feel bitterness, or any other of a range of negative emotions. Further, none of these emotions is inappropriate.¹² As was the case with morally thick concepts, it seems here, too, that there is a great deal of overlap that prevents any particular affective response from tracking moral obligation. Anger might be appropriate when confronted with an immoral action, but *crucially*, it may also be the correct response to incompetence, insensitivity, or other traits that are typically taken to fall outside the realm of morality. The same can be said of the other emotions which we often appropriately experience in response to an immoral action – disgust, sadness, etc. – or in response to a morally good action – happiness, respect, gratitude, etc. So again, the same emotion can be caused or merited in widely diverging cases of both moral and non-moral evaluation; and moral evaluations of the same act by different people might result in the experiencing of different emotions, all of them appropriate, by the different people.

Indeed, what emotions one experiences in response to immoral actions varies depending on many variables – one's temperament (is one more inclined to anger or sadness at such actions?), where one is in her life's narrative (perhaps she has devoted her life to eradicating the sort of atrocities the Chinese committed, and feels as much bitterness as anything else), one's current mood, one's relationship to the victim and perpetrator, and myriad other factors. There simply is no single moral emotion.

Notice, again (for this is crucial), that the overlap goes both ways: the same morally thin property can appropriately cause any of several different emotions, and any one emotion can be the proper response to a number of different types of actions, both morally permissible and immoral. These considerations make it seem unlikely that there is any way to map morality directly onto our contingent emotional reactions. In other words, if different emotional responses can be appropriate for the same immoral act, if different emotional responses can track the same moral obligation, then it doesn't seem as though the particular emotional response generated is doing any work in specifying what is morally right and wrong. That is to say, if different emotional responses can track the same moral obligation,

¹²This is not to say that there would be *no* emotion the experiencing of which was inappropriate.

then it seems as though these emotional states, far from determining morality, are merely our human response to correctly cognized moral ‘facts’ (I use this term loosely). The only contingent element in the equation is our particular human response to objective morality. This seems the correct way to account for the fact that different emotions can all be appropriate responses to one and the same action, and the fact that the same emotion can all be appropriate responses to different categories (moral and non-moral) of actions. If this is right, then this presents difficulties response-dependence theories because it suggests that there is no privileged moral emotion, that there is nothing we can substitute in for “R” in our equivalence.¹³

One might respond that although moral obligation is determined by one emotion, it can be tracked by other emotions. I think this response misses the force of my objection. I contend that there is no uniquely moral emotion that would determine obligation. Many different emotions can be an appropriate response to a particular action, and the same emotions can be appropriate in both moral and non-moral contexts. Anger, disgust, sadness, even some alien emotion of which humans are incapable – all of these can be in certain contexts moral emotions; and all can be non-moral in different contexts. There simply is no mapping of morality onto the emotions that correctly express morality. To repeat myself – for I think this point is the decisive one – this strongly suggests that it is not the emotions which determine correct morality; rather, morality is determined by something else, and our particular response to individual actions may vary with our contingent psychological makeup.

The same reply can be made to those who suggest that the response in question is a sort of disjunction: morally wrong actions are those which are such as to cause anger or disgust or... My earlier point applies here – an emotion such as anger might be appropriately caused by an immoral act, but it might also be caused by a morally permissible action. So if one experiences anger, then the disjunction is satisfied even though the action causing the anger was morally permissible. The same applies to disgust, bitterness, etc. Hence, the equivalence is false. In any case, if different emotions, which typically have different causes and which are simply *different*, can all be acceptable responses to a particular action, then it seems likely that it is not these emotions which determine the moral properties possessed by the action. The emotions in question are too different; they are not that which determines the immorality of the action. Let us move to the final reason to reject response-dependence conceptions of morality.

¹³Again, this is a problem for non-reductive response-dependence theories, as well.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTINGENCY, MORAL OBJECTIVITY

So much for versions of response-dependence that tie moral truth to a specifically *emotional* response. But what about the versions that tie moral truth not to an emotion, but to some other affective response, such as a desire? We will see that these versions should be rejected for the following reason: because our affective responses are contingently rational, we ought not let them play a truth-determining role in morality. I will approach this argument by discussing a familiar worry with response-dependence. This worry is addressed by David Lewis in “Dispositional Theories of Value”:

Psychology is contingent. Our dispositions to value things might have been otherwise than they actually are. We might have been disposed, under ideal conditions, to value seasickness and petty sleaze above all else. Does the dispositional theory imply that, had we been thus disposed, those things would have been values? That seems wrong. (Lewis, 1989, p. 132)

The nagging worry, for many, is that reductive forms of response-dependence tie morality to something altogether contingent. Human psychology varies from possible world to possible world, far more than we think morality ought to vary.

The worry is really this: reductive forms of response-dependence tie morality to something that is contingently *rational*.¹⁴ They do this because they construe our equivalence the wrong way; they confuse the order of explanation. Consider the generic form of our reductive response-dependence equivalence:

X is morally right = X causes response R under ideal conditions

¹⁴When I say that emotions are only contingently rational, I mean two things. First, there are (I suppose) possible world in which emotions are outside of the rational order; they occur without good reason; they are arational. This is one sense in which emotions are contingently rational – there are possible world in which they are outside the rational order. It seems likely that the actual world is a world in which emotions are part of the rational order. But they are still only contingently rational, in the sense that there are plenty of emotional responses that are irrational. Indeed, since we do not have easy access to ideal circumstances, we cannot even be sure that response R tracks the moral truth.

There is another important thing to note about my use of the word ‘rational’ here. I am using ‘rational’ as shorthand for ‘concurring with the deliverances of practical reason.’ I am not assuming any controversial connection between morality and rationality, least of all a Kantian view that morality can be derived from pure reason.

If you were not a response-dependence theorist, you might think the following: you might think that X causes response R because X is morally right. Implicit in this order of explanation is the belief that our affective responses are rational, that R tracks the moral truth. If X is the right action, then it will generate R, because we are sensitive to moral truth.

For the reductive response-dependence theorist, the order of explanation is reversed. As she understands this equivalence, the order of explanation is from right to left. That is, the fact that X causes response R is what makes X morally right. The right side of the equivalence explains the left side. What makes X morally right is that it causes response R under ideal conditions. As I explained in the introduction to this paper, it is reading the order of explanation this way that makes the role played by the psychological response a *truth-determining* role.

But this order of explanation – from right to left – seems to get things exactly wrong. When you give response R, which is only contingently rational, this truth-determining role in morality, you are then unable to preserve the justificatory force of morality. Christine Korsgaard (1996) draws a similar conclusion about theories that try to explain the source of normativity in terms of what we are motivated to do. Although she is, in this passage, writing about theories that explain moral behavior in terms of evolutionarily selected behavioral traits, the point she is making here is the same one I am making about the response-dependence theory:

One possibility . . . in connection with that theory [is] that our moral instincts would be so strong that they could move us, or at least make us miserable, even if we decided that their claims on us were illegitimate. The theory might then explain moral conduct, including the conduct of people who know the theory. But it would not be normative, because the people themselves would not think that their conduct was justified. If they could cure themselves of their instincts, they would. (Korsgaard, 1996, pp. 87–88).¹⁵

The problem highlighted by Korsgaard is this: such a theory might be *explanatory*, but it is not *justificatory*. That is to say, it might explain why we behave as we do, but such descriptive regularities of behavior cannot

¹⁵Is this coherent? Can we coherently say of a deep emotion that it is immoral? I think it is. Not only is it possible for a moral system to arise in which many of our deep emotions and impulses are regarded as contrary to morality, but such moral systems have in fact arisen. After all, many Christians will tell you that humankind's natural impulses are wicked and sinful. Consider an affective state we have all experienced, such as lust. Many of these Christians will tell you that even the experience of this emotion is sinful. Or consider the secular thinkers who have argued that humans are innately wicked because

by themselves suffice to justify this behavior. The deliverance of a contingently rational state, such as an emotion, might explain why we act as we do. It might even serve as valuable evidence for a moral claim;¹⁶ that is, such a deliverance might be right-*indicating*. But the deliverance of such a contingently rational psychological response cannot be right-*making*. It is simply the wrong sort of thing to serve this role. The responses in question are only contingently rational – not the sort of thing to give a truth-determining role in morality.

Granted, in explaining how a moral practice gets started, you will undoubtedly have to appeal to some affect, such as emotion. I will have more to say on this in a moment. But saying that emotion is a necessary condition for moral practice to arise is very different from making such a flighty and changeable thing as emotion the moral truth-maker.

Indeed, these comments apply not just to emotions, but to other affective states, including desires. As Lewis notes in the passage quoted above, psychology is contingent. There are possible worlds in which we do desire seasickness and petty sleaze – indeed, possible worlds in which we desire to desire seasickness and petty sleaze. And so any response-dependence theory, any theory that ties moral truth to the deliverance of some affective response – whether the theory is Lewis's theory of desiring to desire, or Gibbard's theory in terms of *feeling* obligated, or some other similar theory – ties moral truth to something that is contingent, and contingently rational.

So runs the familiar worry about response-dependence conceptions of morality. In a moment, this familiar worry will allow us to introduce a final criticism of response-dependence, to wit: response-dependence accounts of morality cannot explain the objectivity and universality of morality; and since we do not need psychological response to play a truth-constituting role in morality in order to explain the normativity or content of morality, we should reject such response-dependence accounts.

of an exaggerated tribalism and indifference to those who are different or distant. Some philosophers have argued that the emotional ties of family, surely one of the deepest we experience, only stand in the way of maximizing utility, and are therefore immoral. Of course, I only need to show that this possibility is coherent, not that it is right. And, as such moral systems have in fact been constructed, it clearly seems coherent to construct a moral system in which powerful emotions are ignored or overruled.

¹⁶For the epistemic importance of emotions such as sympathy, see Jonathan Bennett's (1974).

RIGIDIFYING REFERENCE TO ACTUAL-WORLD DISPOSITIONS

But before we can run this final objection against response-dependence, we must consider to what extent the familiar worry about response-dependence is a genuine threat to the theory. Surely, our responses are contingent in the following sense: there are possible worlds in which, under ideal conditions, we would, under ideal conditions, be disposed to value (say) seasickness and petty sleaze. A common response to this objection has been to say that morality is determined by the set of responses we have in the *actual* world. So Wiggins writes, “[the subjectivist’s] distinctive claim is rather that *x* is good if and only if *x* is the sort of thing that calls forth or makes appropriate a certain sentiment of approbation *given the range of propensities that we actually have to respond in this or that way*” (Wiggins, 1987, p. 206). Similarly, Lewis writes, “we can take the reference to our dispositions to be rigidified. . . . [T]he things that count as values are those that we are *actually* disposed to value, not those we would have valued in the counterfactual situation” (Lewis, 1989, p. 132).¹⁷ Thus, in a possible world where we are disposed to value seasickness and petty sleaze, these things are not really valuable; even in this possible world, the things that are genuinely valuable are those things that our dispositions *in the actual world* pick out.

While this move reduces the traditional worry that our responses are only contingently rational, it does not make the worry go away. For we can still ask, “Will our *actual* dispositions converge under ideal conditions?” If not, then we are still confronted by relativism. But at this point, the response-dependence theorist will say, “It may be true that our dispositions are contingent and variable; but you cannot merely assume that they are contingent and variable under ideal conditions. If we suppose that our dispositions would converge under ideal conditions, then the response-dependence conception of morality is quite plausible.”¹⁸

But even if we confine our dispositions to the ones we have in the actual world, there is reason to doubt that our responses or dispositions under ideal conditions can play the truth-determining role envisioned for them by the response-dependence theorist. The problem is this: this picture assumes that we all have a generic set of dispositions, and that under condi-

¹⁷Interestingly, Lewis himself takes this strategy to fail. He writes, “The trick of rigidifying seems more to hinder the expression of our worry than to make it go away” (1989, p. 132). I will not pursue Lewis’s reasoning here.

¹⁸This line of thought was suggested by an anonymous referee.

tions of full knowledge, complete imaginative awareness, etc., this generic disposition will deliver a unique verdict in (most) moral cases. But this picture involves an impoverished account – not of ideal conditions, but of our dispositions. This picture assumes that we have a generic set of dispositions that are not altered by our moral commitments, and that moral truth is determined by the deliverances of this generic set of dispositions under ideal conditions. But it seems clear that under ideal conditions, the deliverances of a particular person's dispositions will be affected by the person's prior moral commitments. Thus, a person committed to animal rights would probably, under ideal conditions, be disposed to condemn eating animals, whereas another person might not, under ideal conditions (full imaginative acquaintance, full knowledge, etc.), be disposed to condemn the painless killing of animals for food. The lesson of this is that the relation between dispositions and moral beliefs is not a one-way street – rather, the latter shapes the former as surely as the former shapes the latter. What responses a person will display under ideal conditions depend in large part on the person's pre-existing moral beliefs. (It should go without saying that it will not help the response-dependence theorist to specify that under "ideal conditions" is included "possession of proper moral commitments and beliefs"; this is clearly circular. Nor would it do to imagine the person going into ideal conditions with no pre-existing moral commitments – the resulting responses would no doubt be far too crude to establish a comprehensive set of moral truths.)

Let me state the objection in a different way. Our dispositions are shaped and altered by our moral beliefs and commitments, by our upbringing and moral education. There are no innocent dispositions (dispositions unaffected by upbringing and previous moral commitments) that we can imagine being placed in ideal conditions. How a person will respond, even in ideal conditions, depends on the nature of their relevant dispositions – and these dispositions are shaped by previous moral commitments, moral education, and so forth. Thus, the idea that moral truth is determined by the responses we would have under ideal conditions is based on a myth – one might call it the myth of the innocent disposition.

Thus, the problem of contingency remains for the response-dependence theorist. Tautologically, our responses will only converge under ideal conditions if we have the same dispositions. And we will only have the same dispositions if we have the same prior moral commitments and beliefs. But to know which set of dispositions is the correct one – i.e., to know which one determines morality – it is necessary to know which one is shaped by the correct moral attitudes and beliefs. But of course, the response-depend-

ence theorist cannot tell us which moral attitudes and beliefs ought to be shaping our dispositions, on pain of circularity. But then the response-dependence theorist cannot tell us which dispositions ought to determine morality (i.e., the response-dependence theorist cannot tell us how one ought to be disposed to respond).

The conclusion in the previous sentence is itself a significant problem for the response-dependence theorist. But the problem we are focusing on here is the contingency and variability of our dispositions. Given, then, that our dispositions will diverge under ideal conditions (for the reasons outlined above), and that the response-dependence theorist cannot solve this problem by identifying the correct disposition (i.e., how one ought to be disposed to respond under ideal conditions), it would seem that the problem of relativism and contingency remains a potent one for the response-dependence theorist. Notice, too, that this is true regardless of the affective disposition to which the response-dependence theorist tries to tie morality: whether the disposition in question is a disposition to desire (or desire to desire), or a disposition to experience a particular emotional state, etc., the disposition will be shaped by our previous moral commitments, moral education, and so forth. And so the traditional worry is a problem that faces every version of the response-dependence theory. Any theory that tries to tie moral truth to some psychological disposition will run afoul of this problem.

Thus, the familiar worry with the response-dependence theory seems justified. It seems that the response-dependence theorist is tying morality to something that is altogether too variable to serve a morality-constituting role. This familiar worry allows me to introduce my final criticism of response-dependence, for this worry begs the question, Why should we think that moral truth is tied to a response or disposition, given the contingent rationality of these responses and dispositions? We operate on the presumption that morality is objective, and if response-dependence accounts of morality cannot explain the objectivity of morality, then these accounts should be rejected. So my final argument against response-dependence is, in broad outline, this: first, since our affective responses are only contingently rational, they are unsuitable to serve a truth-determining role in morality – their playing such a role is incompatible with the objectivity of morality. Second, our moral practice does not need our psychological responses to play this truth-determining role. Therefore, we should not view a contingent disposition as playing this truth-determining role in morality.

DIVORCING MORALITY FROM AFFECTIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSE

It has been argued that in our everyday moral practice, we are committed to the non-relativity of morality. For example, Smith lists among his ‘platitudes’ about morality several concerning the objectivity of morality, including the platitude that “When A says that ϕ -ing is right, and B says that ϕ -ing is not right, then at most one of A and B is correct” (Smith, 1994, pp. 39–40). To give another example, it is a commonplace that a presupposition of moral argument is that there is a unique right answer to the question being debated. This presumption regarding the objectivity of morality gives us *prima facie* reason to reject conceptions of morality or of moral facts on which morality turns out to be relative. And since, as I have argued, response-dependence accounts tie morality to something distressingly variable and contingent, we have another reason to reject such accounts. In other words, we should reject response-dependence accounts of morality because they cannot account for the objectivity of morality.

Rejecting response-dependence accounts of morality involves, of course, rejecting the idea that affective responses can play a truth-determining role in morality (since affective responses are among the candidate responses for the response-dependence theorist). The reader may doubt, however, that we can divorce morality very far from affect. There is certainly reason to think we cannot separate morality and affect entirely. Let me introduce the reason this way. Authors like Wiggins have a very plausible theory of the genesis of our moral discourse. We have certain affective responses to certain actions, and these responses get fine-tuned over time until they are responsive to reason, until we can sensibly speak of proper and improper affective responses to actions and events. But if morality is divorced from affect, how does the moral project ever get underway? How do we ever begin to make moral distinctions (or, for that matter, carry on with our moral practice)?

There is surely something to this line of reasoning. It seems likely that morality would not arise among creatures with no affect whatsoever. This is disputed, of course; certain neo-Kantians think that pure reason can generate moral content. I think this view is mistaken, but I will not argue that it is, for if it is true, then so much the better for my position. If it is true, then we do not need affect at all to create and sustain a moral practice. I do think that we need at least one affective capacity: I think we need some bit of benevolence or concern for others (and I do not see how such a capacity could be wholly lacking in affective dimension). If we are concerned about the welfare of others, then we might well construct a system of norms designed to order society for our mutual benefit. From this ca-

capacity for benevolence, it is plausible that we would develop norms to prevent cruelty and pain, and to protect individuals. Furthermore, this is a general and fairly generic bit of affect, and I suspect that as a matter of fact, it is a bit of affect shared by every language-using race. After all, the development of language requires cooperative society, which would be unlikely to arise in a race of creatures devoid of benevolence. I think the history of philosophical thinking has demonstrated that egoism cannot sustain cooperation.¹⁹

Not only does benevolence need to exist for morality to arise; it must exist for morality to be sustained. One could not introduce a moral practice to a race of creatures who did not experience benevolence, for they could never be said to be acting on a moral maxim. Even if their actions occasionally coincided with what we took their obligations to be, their actions could not be described as actions according to a moral maxim, for their motive could not have been a moral one. They could act out of other considerations, but not out of moral ones.²⁰

So some bit of affect (namely, benevolence) must be present for moral practice to arise and be sustained. But (a) the normativity of moral discourse does not require that some affective response serve a truth-determining role in morality, (b) nor is such a role needed if we are to provide content to moral discourse, and (c) response-dependence accounts that tie morality to affect threaten morality with relativism. Since we can account for the normativity and content of morality without giving some affective response a truth-constituting role, and since giving this response such a role threatens the objectivity of morality, our presumption of objectivity seems to counsel rejection of response-dependence accounts of morality. Let me argue these points briefly.

First, the normativity of moral discourse does not require that some affective response serve the truth-determining role envisioned by the response-dependence theorist. For epistemology is also a normative endeavor, yet it would be implausible to claim that we can only account for this normativity by allowing emotion or some similar affective state to play a

¹⁹Of course, some philosophers will disagree and argue that prisoners' dilemmas, free rider problems, and the like can be overcome, and morality can be given a purely egoistic basis. If this is the case, then self-interest, rather than benevolence, is the bit of affect required to get moral discourse off the ground.

²⁰Of course, a Kantian would deny this – for a Kantian, the most praiseworthy motive is the motive of duty. But if Kantianism is right, then my position is not weakened, for Kantianism further weakens the connection between morality and emotion.

truth-determining role in epistemology, by making epistemology response-dependent. Thus, a discourse can be normative without being response-dependent in the manner described in this paper.

Second, practical reasoning can generate moral content if no affective response serves the truth-determining role in morality that the response-dependence theorist thinks it does. As noted above, it is plausible to suppose that given some capacity for benevolence, we would develop norms to prevent cruelty and pain, and to protect individuals. Affect (such as emotions) might be required to serve an epistemic role in the formulation of these norms – it might sensitize us to human suffering in a way that enables us to respond to such suffering²¹ – but if we care about others, we can formulate rules to protect our fellow humans; all we need is to care for their welfare. So response-dependence need not be true if we are to give content to morality.

What this shows is that we need to distinguish between the conditions under which moral discourse arises and the truth conditions for particular moral claims.²² Benevolence may be required for moral discourse to arise; but that is not the same as saying that moral truth is determined by the generation of a particular affective response. Morality may require benevolence in order to arise, but it does not follow that response-dependence must be true. Rather, moral rules might instead be formulated by considerations about how to maximize our mutual autonomy or well-being, or some combination of the two, or which would allow us to have most of our interests met, or so forth. We need not appeal to response-dependence in order to give content to morality.

So it would seem that we can erect a substantial barrier between morality and our contingent affective responses. This brings us to our conclusion: given that we can account for the normativity and content of morality without reverting to a response-dependence account of morality, we ought to reject such accounts, as they have consequences that contradict our everyday platitudes about the objectivity and universality of moral discourse. We should not think of morality as being shackled to contingently rational features of our psychology, precisely *because* these features are

²¹Even Kant, who is hardly about to admit that affect (as belonging to our empirical nature) plays a constitutive role in morality, acknowledged that emotion can be important epistemically and motivationally, urging us to cultivate our feelings of sympathy, a feeling “placed in us by nature for effecting what the representation of duty might not accomplish by itself” (1983, “The Elements of Ethics,” §35).

²²Maggie Little helped me formulate this point.

contingently rational. Such responses can play an epistemic and evidential role, or perhaps even a weak constitutive role (similar to the relation between use and meaning in the example from this paper's introduction); but we ought to resist making the connection any stronger than that.

Before moving on, I should clarify one point. I am only denying one sort of connection between morality and affect: the truth-determining, response-dependent connection. I do not deny that affect (including emotion) plays an epistemic role in morality, sensitizing us the needs of others, allowing for empathy, and so on.²³ Nor do I deny that contingent psychological responses serve an evidential role. Consider the sort of evidence we provide for moral claims: "That embarrassed her"; "That caused him great joy"; "That was important to her, and you made it look foolish; she was humiliated". The type of moral treatment we give people is predicated on their individual psychological needs. If someone is grief-stricken, the ways in which it is appropriate to treat her differ from the ways in which it is appropriate to treat someone who is jocular. Or while a certain amount of good-natured ribbing might be permissible when the target is thick-skinned, the same amount of teasing would be cruel when inflicted upon someone who is more sensitive. The important thing to note is that none of us takes this feature of morality to be relativism, or a sign of relativism. In each case we are acting on something like the maxim, "One ought not be cruel," and treating people in accordance with what would amount to cruelty to them. We have the same obligation toward different people, but this obligation is played out in different ways.²⁴ Roughly, we are tailoring our moral response to fit the psychological needs of a different community, or a different segment of our own community. Also, my emotions toward you can affect my obligations toward you: if I don't love you, I

²³One might worry, however, that allowing emotion to play an epistemic role in morality will relativize morality. For example, if Jones's emotional make-up prevents her from perceiving certain moral requirements, does that mean these moral requirements are not binding on her? I argue that the epistemic role emotions play in morality does not relativize morality in my (2001).

²⁴I take it, though, that even if I had different obligations toward different people (which seems a possibility on this account), that would not be relativism either. After all, this is a feature of our everyday moral discourse: virtually noone would deny that my obligations to my wife differ from my obligations to my next door neighbor. It is even possible for different people to have different obligations to the same person without this being a case of relativism. For example, my obligations toward my neighbors' children differ from their obligations to their children. So clearly, relativism is not just a matter of different people having different obligations, or being owed different things.

shouldn't marry you.²⁵ In these cases, these emotions are merely empirical features of the world that serve evidential relations to moral claims. In a similar way, contingent features of our human constitution (for example, the fact that we cannot see in the infrared spectrum) can be appealed to in epistemology, for they are relevant to the sorts of beliefs one might be justified in believing. Thus, in both morality and epistemology, our contingent makeup is an empirical feature of the world that stands in an evidential relation to claims about moral obligations and about justified beliefs.

Hopefully, this provides the final impetus for the rejection of response-dependence and related subjectivist accounts of moral discourse. Contingent affective responses might serve an evidential or epistemic role, but it might also be obstacles to be overcome in pursuit of moral virtue. In no case should we view moral truth as being determined by some contingent affective response; we should not think that morality is shackled so tightly to this contingent (and possibly irrational) feature of our psychology. Response-dependence accounts of morality cannot account for the objectivity of morality, and hence should be rejected.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We began this paper by examining the most common form of response-dependence, which ties moral truth to the generation of some specific *emotion*. I argued that our moral terms did not map onto our emotions, which they would, if this common version of response-dependence were true. We then turned our attention to an argument that addressed reductive versions of response-dependence that tie morality to affect: since such response-dependence accounts of morality cannot explain the objectivity and universality of morality; and since we do not need affect to play a truth-constituting role in morality in order to explain the normativity or content of morality, we should reject such response-dependence accounts, thereby freeing morality of a potentially relativizing influence.

One loose end remains to be tied up: some authors (such as John McDowell) have argued that one cannot have moral knowledge unless one experiences the proper response. You might characterize this as a weak version of response-dependence: *grasping X's moral wrongness* requires experiencing response R; the latter is a necessary condition for the former.

²⁵This example was suggested by Mark Lance.

Thus, McDowell argues that we need to give a response-dependence account of the possession conditions for moral concepts, as opposed to a response-dependence account of the truth-conditions for moral claims; the latter form of response-dependence is the chief target of this paper.²⁶

The most important thing to notice about this claim is the following: even if recognizing the wrongness of X requires that we experience some affective response, there is no particular affective response that one must experience in order to count as recognizing X's wrongness. Even if response-dependence were true, even if some affective response determined X's wrongness, it would not follow that individual moral agents would have to experience R in order to count as knowing that X was wrong. And indeed, as I argued in the section "Mapping Morality Onto Emotion," many different emotions – even an alien emotion – can count as an appropriate response to a moral wrong. And so there is no particular emotion or response one needs to experience to count as recognizing X's wrongness.²⁷

Michael Stocker has argued (1996) that possession of emotions is necessary for personhood. This claim is quite plausible, but whatever emotions one might require qua person, we should limit their role in morality in the ways outlined in this paper. That is to say, emotions may serve an epistemic and evidential role in morality, but they should not be given the truth-determining role in morality envisioned by the response-dependence theorist. Emotions may give rise to personhood, community, value – and obligation. But contingent, affective psychological responses in general (and emotions in particular) should give rise to obligation in the manner described above, a manner which does not force us into some sort of anti-realism. Thus, it would seem that so far we have no reason to fear the involvement of our contingent human psychology in morality.²⁸

²⁶Philip Pettit (1991) makes this distinction as well. I am grateful to an anonymous review for *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* for suggesting this way of putting McDowell's point and for pointing out that Pettit also makes this distinction.

²⁷One might, however, worry about the incommensurability worries raised by McDowell's position. After all, McDowell is focusing on the epistemic role played by affect in morality: what emotions do we need to experience to have moral knowledge? This raises the question, What if a race of creatures with a different affective nature could not grasp our moral concepts, could not have the appropriate moral knowledge? Would that lead to relativism? In my (2001), I argue that this sort of incommensurability would not lead to relativism.

²⁸I am grateful to a number of people for the feedback and criticism that gave this paper its current form. Mark Lance, Maggie Little, and Henry Richardson read numerous early drafts and provided outstanding feedback. Mark Murphy, Steve Kuhn, and Kelly Jolley also provided helpful comments on various drafts.

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