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Debating Dispositions

Issues in Metaphysics, Epistemology
and Philosophy of Mind

Edited by
Gregor Damschen, Robert Schnepf
and Karsten R. Stüber

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Introduction

GREGOR DAMSCHEN, ROBERT SCHNEPF, KARSTEN STUEBER

Ordinary language and scientific discourse are filled with linguistic expressions for dispositional properties such as “soluble,” “elastic,” “reliable,” and “humorous.” We characterize objects in all domains – physical objects as well as human persons – with the help of dispositional expressions. Hence, the concept of a disposition has historically and systematically played a central role in different areas of philosophy, ranging from metaphysics to ethics. In this context one only needs to think of the important function that the concept of potentiality has in Aristotle’s metaphysics and the central role that the concept of a habitus plays in Aristotelian ethics. Yet, according to the orthodox view, ever since modern times the status of dispositions has been ontologically and epistemologically suspect. From the perspective of the mechanistic sciences of the 17th and 18th century, Aristotelian potentialities were generally regarded as occult qualities being of no explanatory help for our understanding of how the world works. Philosophically equally influential has been Humean empiricism and its epistemological skepticism regarding the existence of causal powers. Within the context of 20th century philosophy, particularly due to the influence of logical positivism, those Humean inclinations have persisted in that one generally felt that dispositional properties cannot be regarded as being ontologically autonomous. Moreover, one felt that dispositional talk could be regarded as cognitively significant only if one could show it to be analyzable in terms of semantically less objectionable notions. No wonder then that in the century of logical analysis the history of the concept of disposition is to a large extent characterized by a discussion about various attempts to semantically analyze dispositional language. So far, none of the proposed analyses seems to be without its shortcomings. Accordingly, from the perspective of semantic analysis, the status of dispositional language appears to be anything but settled.

Yet in recent years, various philosophers have started to question the negative attitude towards dispositions and have begun to argue for a serious reevaluation of the philosophical presuppositions responsible for the modern suspicions about dispositions and dispositional terminology. Some philosophers have maintained that dispositions and dispositional terminology are on par with non-dispositional properties and predicates. Some have even

more strongly suggested that dispositions are ontologically more basic than non-dispositional properties. In short, the current philosophical climate is again well disposed towards dispositions. Consequently, most of the articles in this anthology reflect this friendlier attitude toward dispositions. Indeed various authors argue explicitly against the modern and Humean prejudice regarding dispositions and claim that dispositions have to be regarded as part of the basic furniture of the universe.

Three interrelated systematic topics are at the foreground of the contemporary discussion about dispositions; that is, semantic, epistemic, and ontological considerations. The semantic question concerns the issue of whether or not statements like “the glass is fragile” can be completely analyzed in terms of notions that are both epistemically and metaphysically innocuous. Within the context of 20th century philosophy that meant that they have to be analyzed in terms of notions that are acceptable to Humeans, who abhor the postulation of necessary connections and causal efficacy in nature. Particularly important in this context has been the discussion about various proposals of analyzing dispositional statements in terms of counterfactual conditionals (e.g. David Lewis) and whether or not such analyses can be shown to be immune to counter-examples. As one of the authors in this anthology suggests the discussion of such counterexamples has reached “folkloric status” within the context of analytic metaphysics. The epistemic problem considered in this context concerns the question of whether or not one is justified in ascribing dispositions even though they are empirically not directly accessible. From a Humean perspective, only observable properties can justify the ascription of dispositional terms. Normally however the fragility of a glass is ascribed before it manifests its disposition. Finally, from an ontological perspective, one has focused on the question of whether – and if so, how – dispositional properties depend or supervene on non-dispositional or categorical properties. More specifically, one has been interested in debating of whether or not the existence of bare dispositions, that is, dispositions whose existence does not depend on categorical dispositions is possible. One also has investigated of whether or not the distinction between dispositional and non-dispositional categorical properties can be made in a principled manner, or whether all properties contain a dispositional element; such as, that the property of a triangle has the disposition to make us count up to three if we count a triangle’s corners.

A number of articles in this anthology address and document the 20th century discussion about dispositions within these three dimensions; particularly the articles by Schrenk, Mumford, McKittrick, and Borghini in the third part. Yet in contrast to some of the recent books and anthologies that are primarily concerned with addressing and collecting specific semantic, epistemic, and ontological arguments for or against the existence of

dispositions, the invitation to debating dispositions – the title of this anthology – is more broadly conceived. It is the hope of the editors that the more welcoming attitude towards dispositions in the recent philosophical climate allows for a much more wide-ranging reflection on the nature of disposition by documenting in detail the importance of this concept in the history of philosophy from ancient to contemporary times. In this manner, we hope to open the contemporary discourse to insights gained in the history of philosophy. As some of the articles reveal, the result of such historical research is at times rather surprising. Moreover, the anthology broadens the perspective on dispositions not merely by including a historical dimension but by also addressing the issue of disposition in more localized contexts: Contexts, in which dispositional terminology play a central role, but which have been neglected in the current debate on dispositions. This negligence can be explained by the aforementioned general skepticism about dispositions and dispositional terminology. If one is generally skeptical about the validity of dispositional terminology, then differences among contexts, where dispositional terminology is used, do not seem to matter much. Yet, once the philosophical dominance of the general skeptical attitude towards disposition is alleviated, as is the case in the recent philosophical climate, a more detailed and localized discussion of dispositions becomes necessary. Even if dispositions can be shown on a very general level to be part of the furniture of the universe, this insight does not automatically imply that all dispositional terminology is immune from extinction. Certainly one is inclined to say that the solubility of salt in water is due to its internal physical structure. The solubility of salt might therefore be regarded as being reducible to some categorical lower order physical properties. Yet such reducibility might not be in the offing for mental dispositions such as belief, desires and so on. For that very reason and in order to recognize differences between types of dispositions, in this anthology, dispositions are not merely discussed on the most general level but the topic of disposition *is* also addressed in more localized circumstances. They are addressed in the context of epistemology, where dispositions have lately been much talked about by so called virtue epistemologists. They are also discussed in articles focusing on the philosophy of mind and and in articles addressing the nature of dispositions delineated by our folk psychological vocabulary. Moreover, questions that were already centrally important for Plato of whether the human mind and human knowledge has a propositional structure – as is assumed within the contemporary cognitive model of the mind – or whether the structure of mind and knowledge is fundamentally non-propositional and irreducibly “dispositional” are newly addressed in this anthology. Finally, the status of dispositions is illuminated by discussing their role in a natural science like physics – a discipline that has been skeptical about dispositions since the

foundations of modern science – and a human science such as history, since the attribution of “mentalities” and “character traits” to individual or collective agents such as nations seem to play a central role in historical explanations.

The anthology is divided into four main sections. The contributions of the first part analyze the ancient foundations of the discussion about dispositions. In his “Knowledge and Virtue as Dispositions in Plato’s *Theaetetus*,” FRANCISCO GONZALEZ argues that already Plato acknowledges the reality of dispositions. As he shows in his illuminating interpretation of the *Theaetetus*, Plato conceives of knowledge essentially in dispositional terms. Accordingly, without counting dispositions among the things that fully are, as Plato explicitly does in his *Sophist*, he would not be able to make ontological sense of the possibility of knowledge. As Gonzalez concludes, “the epistemology of the *Theaetetus* can be said to require the ontology of the *Sophist*.”

LUDGER JANSEN further expands the exploration of the ancient reflection on dispositions by analyzing in detail the most comprehensive account by an ancient philosopher in his “Aristotle’s Theory of Dispositions: From the Principle of Movement to the Unmoved Mover.” He situates Aristotle’s theory within its linguistic and philosophical contexts and delineates its wide-ranging conceptual framework for analyzing the nature of dispositions. The precise nature of Aristotle’s ontological commitments regarding the existence of possibilities or mere potentialities is further explained in comparison to the Megarian position that denies that such entities exist and in comparison to the influential interpretation by Nicolai Hartmann and Jaakko Hintikka. For Jansen, Aristotle succeeds in providing a “consistent ontology of causal properties with an enormous explanatory appeal.”

The final essay in this part, BURKHARD MEIBNER’S contribution “Dispositions in Greek Historiography,” closely analyzes the philosophical foundations and the use of dispositional terminology in the texts of ancient historians, particularly Plutarch, Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and Polybius. As he argues and concretely illustrates, ancient historians utilize the attribution of dispositional character traits as their central explanatory strategy in their historical narratives. Yet, the use of such dispositional terminology is not merely determined by their explanatory interests, but is also colored by the educational and moral interests that motivated ancient historians to write their historical narratives in the first place.

The second part of the anthology examines the problem of disposition within the context of the foundation of modern science and analyzes this dispute up to the 20th century. The view is rather widespread that modern science with its mechanist paradigm simply had no use for the scholastic talk of dispositions, faculties, capacities, essences, and natures. Corresponding to

the friendly attitude towards dispositions dominant in contemporary debates, this picture of early-modern philosophy can be slightly modified.

PETER MACHAMER argues in his “The Dispositions of Descartes” that Descartes, despite his otherwise sceptical attitude towards scholastic notions, had a manifest need for dispositions, especially in his natural philosophy. Machamer illustrates this point with the help of Descartes’ reflection on states of equilibrium in his mechanics. Moreover, Machamer argues that Descartes’ conception of God’s activity as recreating the whole nature in every instant constitutes a conceptual scheme that requires reference to dispositions. Only in this manner can we coherently understand the world we live in.

URSULA RENZ provides in her “Explicable Explainers: The Problem of Mental Dispositions in Spinoza’s *Ethics*” a thorough analysis of the role of dispositions in Spinoza’s philosophy of mind. She starts with the observation that on an ontological level Spinoza’s necessitarianism leaves no room for the reality of possibility and, consequently, the reality of dispositions. On the other hand, Spinoza uses dispositional terms within his philosophy of mind in order to account for mental states and actions. According to Renz, Spinoza’s view can be made sense of if one understands dispositions as “explicable explainers.” They are “properties” that serve an epistemic function in explanatory contexts, but they can be explained by other more basic properties of an individual. In this manner, Spinoza’s rejection of the mind as a cause behind its activities and as bearer of mental properties can be reconciled with his use of dispositions in explanatory contexts.

The contribution “Harmonizing Modern Physics with Aristotelian Metaphysics: Leibniz’s Theory of Force” by MICHAEL-THOMAS LISKE discusses Leibniz’s philosophical reasons for an excessive use of dispositional terminology in an intellectual climate determined by modern science. Liske’s paper provides an overview of the different types of dispositions and their several functions within the physics and metaphysics of Leibniz. As Liske explains, Leibniz made the concept of force a central category of his metaphysical system in order to provide an answer to questions that in principle could not be answered within the mechanistic framework. Whereas the quantitative principles of modern science certainly are far superior in their predictive power than the qualitative principles of ancient and medieval science, they do not allow us to answer the question of why nature obeys one mechanistic law rather than another. It is in the context of such questions that Leibniz makes use of the dispositional concept of a force. He conceives of it in Aristotelian terms as an *entelechy*, a goal directed principle that is immanent in nature.

OLIVER R. SCHOLZ’S article “From Ordinary Language to the Metaphysics of Dispositions: Gilbert Ryle on Disposition Talk and Dispositions” concludes the historical sections of this anthology by discussing

the relevant claims of the philosopher who was one of the main figures most responsible for the revival of interest in the concept of disposition in the 20th century. Scholz shows how Ryle intended the *Concept of Mind* to be a prime example for a new philosophical method of linguistic analysis and provides a comprehensive account of Ryle's analysis of dispositions. Specifically he shows how, for Ryle, statements about the meaning of disposition talk are intertwined with ontological claims about the nature of dispositions itself. This however is Ryle's fundamental mistake; a mistake that confuses the meaning or sense of linguistic expressions with their reference. Accordingly, even though Ryle has been influential in rehabilitating dispositions as a topic of philosophical conversation, his own account shows severe deficits. As Scholz concludes, "more promising accounts had to await the return of scientific realism."

The articles of the third section of this anthology are focusing on issues that are the main topics of the current discussion about dispositions. MARKUS SCHRENK'S contribution "Hic Rhodos, Hic Salta: From Reductionist Semantics to a Realist Ontology of Forceful Dispositions" offers a detailed discussion of the several attempts of semantic reduction of dispositions documenting how every new analysis has provoked novel counterexamples. Instead of endlessly prolonging the debate about the proper analysis of dispositional statements, Schrenk suggests to challenge the Humean framework that has motivated the search for a semantic analysis in the first place. He opts for a version of dispositional realism. The difficult task for a dispositional realist consists in explicating the nature of dispositional powers. Schrenk argues that this notion can not be cashed out in terms of metaphysical necessity, as some philosophers have recently claimed. Rather, a different anti-Humean connection in nature has to do that job. Schrenk provides some tentative suggestions of how one could conceptualize this different connection and proposes a return to a Leibnizian notion of force.

STEPHEN MUMFORD'S essay "Ascribing Disposition" continues the argument for dispositional realism. Yet in contrast to Schrenk, Mumford's argument focuses on the epistemic problems traditionally associated with ascribing dispositions to objects or persons. Mumford argues that, pace Humean empiricism, we have good reasons for accepting an ontology which contains dispositions and powers that are seen as basic entities and as grounding necessary connections in nature. Moreover, for Mumford the concept of a dispositional power is primary, since it allows us to analyze concepts such as causation, laws of nature, modality, and properties. In order to support his position Mumford develops a "transcendental argument" emphasizing the fruitfulness and explanatory power of an ontology that contains the assumption of the existence of unverifiable dispositions.

In her essay "Dispositional Pluralism," JENNIFER MCKITRICK argues explicitly against the philosophical tendency of making all-or-nothing claims about dispositions such as that all properties are dispositions, or that all properties are non-dispositions, that all dispositions are intrinsic, and so on. For McKitrick, this philosophical tendency is overlooking the fact that there is a plurality of different disposition types. She argues for her position by suggesting that a semantic analysis of our ordinary way of talking and of ascribing dispositions is more consistent with dispositional pluralism rather than dispositional absolutism. Moreover since we are also ordinarily justified in thinking that our ordinary ascriptions are true, we have reasons for claiming that there is a plurality of different types of dispositional properties; and not merely a plurality of different disposition concepts.

ANDREA BORGHINI'S "Dispositions and Their Intentions" addresses the question of how exactly to analyze the nature of dispositions within the context of dispositionalism according to which dispositions are primitive denizens of reality with an irreducibly modal character. Among dispositionalists, Charlie Martin, Ullin Place, and George Molnar have argued that the modal character of dispositions should be understood in terms of their intentionality. Other dispositionalists, most notably Stephen Mumford, have challenged this understanding of the modal character of dispositions. Borghini defends a fresh version of the intentional understanding of dispositions. The core of the proposed view consists in treating a disposition as a primitive entity whose understanding depends on a metaphorical specification of its intention.

In the final section, the role of dispositions in different areas of scientific and philosophical research are analyzed. As mentioned above, the contributions in this section are intended to broaden the current framework of the discussion by addressing the subject of disposition in more localized contexts. The first two articles address the topic of dispositions from the perspective of a natural and a human science. ANDREAS HÜTTEMANN defends a version of dispositional realism in his article "Dispositions in Physics" by arguing for the following three theses: First, in contrast to Armstrong, he argues that law-statements should be understood as attributing dispositional properties. In this context, dispositions are, however, not understood as causes of their manifestations. Rather Hüttemann conceives of them as contributors to the behavior of compound systems. It is in this sense, that he defends his third claim that within physics dispositional properties have to be regarded as irreducible properties that have no need for an additional categorical basis.

ROBERT SCHNEFF, on the other hand, tackles the issue of disposition by looking more closely at the nature of historical explanations. In his essay "The Role of Dispositions in Historical Explanations," he analyzes dispositional

explanations such as the explanation of Caesar's behavior during the Roman Civil War in terms of a so called "Clementia Caesaris" or Max Weber's appeal to the "protestant spirit" in his account of the rise of modern capitalism. Schnepf focuses on the epistemological problem of ascribing dispositions to historical actors. He shows that especially Max Weber's methodological reflections on this issue fit very well with an analysis of dispositions in terms of counterfactuals. For Schnepf, this implies that dispositions should be understood as theoretical terms. More substantial metaphysical assumptions of forces, faculties, or capacities are therefore of no use in a historian's explanatory work.

KARSTEN STUEBER addresses the question of disposition within the context of philosophy of mind; the conceptual domain that Ryle first hoped to fully analyze with the help of the concept of disposition. In his contribution "Empathy, Mental Dispositions, and the Physicalist Challenge," he is particularly interested in investigating the ontological status of higher order dispositions. Stueber argues for the special status of mental dispositions such as beliefs and desires because of their doubly dispositional character. Folk psychological predicates ascribe dispositional properties to other agents. Yet, as Stueber shows, in contrast to ascriptions of properties and dispositions in the physical sciences, the ascription of mental dispositions is epistemically special, because it depends essentially on the use of the first person perspective and our empathic ability to put ourselves in the shoes of another. It is exactly for this reason that Stueber regards our folk psychological practices as constituting an ontologically relatively autonomous and epistemically special explanatory domain. Stueber also shows that his position is fully compatible with the assumption of ontological physicalism.

GREGOR DAMSCHEN'S contribution "Dispositional Knowledge-How versus Propositional Knowledge-That" relates to issues in the philosophy of mind and epistemology; that is questions about the structure of the mind and the nature of knowledge. In particular, Damschen deals with the question of the structure of knowledge and the precise relationship between propositional "knowledge-that" and dispositional "knowledge-how." In the first part of his essay, he provides an analysis of the term 'knowing how' and argues that the usual alternatives in the recent epistemological debate – knowing how is either a form of propositional or dispositional knowledge – are misleading. In fact it depends on the semantic and pragmatic context of the usage of this term whether 'knowing how' refers to a type of dispositional knowledge, to propositional knowledge, or to a hybrid form of both. Only in the first case, can one say that dispositional know how cannot be reduced to any form of propositional knowledge. Yet for Damschen, this case is the most interesting one to consider in the investigation of the nature of knowledge, if one assumes that knowing that *p* presupposes "having found out that *p*." This

assumption, as Damschen argues, seems to be implied in an internalist conception of knowledge. Having found something out, however, presupposes certain acts of epistemic inquiry and corresponding epistemic abilities. Accordingly, dispositional knowledge has to be understood as being at the very core of our notion of knowledge, including propositional knowledge.

The last two articles in this anthology presuppose the ontological relaxed attitude towards dispositions manifested in the prior articles. They do not fundamentally question the reality of dispositions but take them for granted. Their purpose is rather to discuss and elaborate on the use of the concept of disposition in recent epistemology, particularly virtue epistemology. The central concern of DAVID HENDERSON and TERENCE HORGAN in their paper "Epistemic Virtue and Cognitive Dispositions" is not to explicate the metaphysical status of cognitive dispositions. Rather, they are interested in making a point about the range of dispositions that are epistemically important. From their point of view, epistemology in the modern period has understood only a narrowly restricted range of cognitive dispositions as epistemically relevant; what they refer to as *classically inferential processes* (or dispositions to classical inference). But for Henderson and Horgan, it is important to recognize that the useful epistemic chores are not all implemented by classical inference, but by dispositions keyed to richer sets of information.

In the very last essay of this anthology "The Epistemic Function of Virtuous Dispositions," ELKE BRENDEL takes a critical look at virtue epistemology. While she acknowledges that thinking of intellectual virtues as dispositions provides important epistemological insights, Brendel is rather skeptical about the attempt to define knowledge in terms of virtuous dispositions. As she argues, this could be a feasible and promising epistemological project if and only if some of the central concepts and ideas of virtue epistemology are revised or at least refined. The major problem for defining knowledge in terms of intellectual virtues and dispositions consists in the fact that many intellectual virtues are not strictly truth-conducive.