Siding with Euthyphro

Response-Dependence, Essentiality, and the Individuation of Ordinary Objects

by

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ABSTRACT

The motivation for the dissertation is the desire to take a certain Kantian intuition seriously. This is the intuition that aspects of the world may be dependent in some way on, or constructed by, human thought and practices. The aim of the thesis is to offer one clear and coherent articulation of this intuition.

What I offer is an account of what makes a property essential to an object that traces the source of that essentiality to our conceptual practices. This is a key component of an anti-realist essentialism.

The main claim is that essentiality—the property of being an essential property of an object—is conferred by ideal representatives of us concept users. The idea that a property is conferred is familiar to us from Plato: Does the gods' love confer the property of being pious on the action or do the gods merely detect the property of being pious in the action and their love is simply a reaction to it? How is one to argue that a property is, perhaps despite first appearances, conferred? In the first chapter, I draw on the literature on response-dependence to provide a general strategy for arguing that a property is conferred. In the second chapter, I use that general strategy to argue that essentiality is conferred by ideal representatives of us concept users at the limit of enquiry into what we actual concept users are committed to in our use of concepts. It is the ideal representatives' finding it inconceivable that the object in question not have the property that confers essentiality onto a property of the object. In this way essentiality is shown to have its source in our conceptual practices, and not in a world that is independent of us. The third chapter brings out epistemological virtues of my conferralist account of essentiality. I start with our practices of engaging in thought experiments about the essences of things and show how my account vindicates those practices.
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Preface

In the spring of 1999 I went to an art exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York entitled “Picasso and the War Years”. Some of the works presented there were familiar from books and catalogues, but none of them had I met eye-to-eye. I was very taken by one particular sculpture, the 1943 *Man with a Lamb*, which I found to be a perfect expression of certain ideas: the tiredness of an older, emasculated man, holding a lamb, perhaps as sacrifice, perhaps as a symbol of hope in the midst of the terror of war. Moreover, the bronze with its rough finish was a perfect medium for the expression of these ideas. I asked myself: How does such perfection come into being? Then I took a look at what Picasso had been working on up until that time. In those works I saw a glimpse of what the *Man with a Lamb* expressed, just not as clearly and not as forcefully. I saw sketches and oil paintings with women, men, children, and animals of every stripe. They were young and old and in various positions. All in all there were about 50 sketches or paintings where I could see the ideas taking form, the *Man with a Lamb* getting carved into being.

My approach in my dissertation is the approach of the sculptor, who starts out with a hunch or a vague idea and strives to find it adequate expression. I had a rather vague, but strong, intuition and I wanted to find it form. The sketches have been numerous, but what I present in the following pages is the formulation I have arrived at to date. Finding an adequate formulation may indeed be a lifelong project and if so the dissertation itself is little more than a sketch, but I hope it detailed enough so that the interest in and importance of finding an adequate formulation may be apparent.
Many people have supported me in this endeavor, although, of course, none of them is responsible for the views expressed herein. First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Sally Haslanger, for her critical engagement with each and every one of my many sketches and her unflinching belief in me. I am very lucky to have had her as my advisor and role model.

I am also very grateful to the other members of my dissertation committee, Robert Stalnaker and Alex Byrne, and to Ralph Wedgwood, Stephen Yablo, Catherine Elgin, Ned Hall, and Judith Jarvis Thomson for their advising and support throughout my graduate career.

I would like to thank the many friends who have read parts of this dissertation or talked with me about issues raised in it: Clare Batty, Selim Berker, Jason Decker, Tyler Doggett, Andy Egan, Iris Einheuser, Roxanne Fay, Elizabeth Harman, Patrick Hawley, James John, Mary Kate McGowen, Sarah McGrath, Bernard Nickel, Adina Roskies, and Christopher Sturr. For that and for her friendship—and the many hours avoiding the bugs in the backcountry—I would like to thank Cathy Wearing. And Ishani Maitra I would like to thank for being as close to being a philosophical sister as an only child could hope to have.

My other debts are of a strictly personal nature. I would like to thank my parents for their support throughout this time; Rita Teusch for her insight and care; and Rebecca McLennan for her ást og umhyggja.
Introduction

The Kantian intuition and sensible constructivism

What motivates this dissertation is the desire to take a certain intuition seriously and find it a clear and coherent form. The intuition in question is inherited from Kant and is to the effect that aspects of the world may in some way be dependent upon or constructed by human thought and practices. Many people share this motivating intuition. Nominalists and conventionalists of various sorts have resisted the idea that nature has its own joints, independent of our carvings; in some academic circles a recent expression of this idea is that things are socially constructed. Sometimes the claim is epistemic, e.g., that people's social and conceptual practices influence their conceptions of that thing. But sometimes the view is meant to have metaphysical upshot, viz., that people's social and conceptual practices shape or determine or construct what that thing is. My thesis offers one way of articulating the impulse behind such a constructivist view.

Why articulate the Kantian intuition? The dominant picture of the relationship between the world we interact with and us and our thoughts in Anglo-American philosophy today has the world already divided up into properties and things and our task as attempting to devise concepts to map onto an already structured world. This dominant picture expresses the realist impulse that we thinkers and agents are constrained in our activities and conceptualization by a world that is independent of us. According to another polar opposite picture the world as it is independent from us is mere cookie-dough that can be carved up any way we want with our concepts. This latter picture isn't very popular these days, chiefly because it is taken to be too closely aligned with radical subjectivism, voluntarism, or idealism, doctrines that are seen to involve lack of
proper constraints on our thought, cognizing, and action due to an independent world. While I am not here to restore idealism to its former glory, or advocate any of the other -isms mentioned, I think that such views are often motivated by the Kantian intuition I think ought to be taken seriously. However, I think it possible to take that intuition seriously and find it form without sliding into radical subjectivism, voluntarism, or idealism. I do think that just as the idealist neglects the constraints an independent world puts on our action and cognizing, so the realist neglects the influence our thought and practices have on the world we live in. The realist mistakes what is of our making for the makings of nature; the idealist mistakes the makings of nature for our own making. My hope is to strike a balance between the two: to acknowledge and articulate the influence we have on shaping the world we live in, yet be sensitive to the constraints on our thought, cognition, and action.

Putting aside the broad brushes, what is the articulation of the Kantian intuition that I offer in this thesis? Briefly put, what I offer is a key component of an anti-realist essentialism, i.e., an account of what makes a property essential to an object that traces the source of that essentiality to our conceptual practices. The main claim is that essentiality—the property of being an essential property of an object—is conferred by ideal representatives of us concept users.

The idea that a property is conferred is familiar to us from Plato. Socrates asks Euthyphro: Is the action pious because it is loved by the Gods or is it loved by the gods because it is pious? The question is, as I would put it: Does the gods' love confer the property of being pious on the action or do the gods merely detect the property of being pious in the action and their love is simply a reaction to it?
This is an intuitive distinction but it is surprisingly hard to draw it precisely and to offer a way to show how a property is conferred. In my first chapter I provide a general strategy for arguing that a property is conferred that can be used to side with Euthyphro about any property drawing on the literature on response-dependence.

In the second chapter, I use that general strategy to argue that essentiality is conferred in a particular way. In the Euthyphro case the conferralist claim is that the Greek gods' love confers the property of being pious on an action. In the case of essentiality the subjects at issue are not gods of any nationality, but ideal representatives of us actual concept users. And it is not their love, but rather their finding it inconceivable that the object in question not have the property that confers essentiality onto a property of the object. This applies to any object, be it a chair, a tiger, or a human being. For example, my armchair's being made of wood is essential just in case ideal representatives of us users of concepts such as that of being an armchair would find it inconceivable that the chair not be made of wood, given that it is. Similarly, Tigo's being a tiger is essential just in case ideal representatives of us users of concepts such as that of being a tiger would find it inconceivable that Tigo not be a tiger, given that Tigo is one.

In the third chapter I offer a different argument for my conferralist account of essentiality. I take seriously our practices of engaging in thought experiments about the essences of things and show how my account vindicates those practices, whereas such vindication poses a prima facie challenge for the realist. What this shows is that not only can a coherent conferralist account be articulated; it has virtues the realist lacks.

Let us look at the proposal in detail.
Siding with Euthyphro

Response-dependence and conferred properties

Euthyphro is in the unfortunate situation of having to prosecute his own father, because he thinks that is the pious thing to do. Socrates, in his customary fashion, insists that Euthyphro give him an account of what it is for an action to be pious. When Euthyphro responds that to be pious is to be loved by the gods, Socrates asks him: Is what is pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods? Euthyphro’s initial position seems to be that what is pious is so because it is loved by the gods, although he later succumbs to Socrates’ powers of persuasion, and agrees with him that the gods love the pious because it is pious.

Let us consider Euthyphro’s position before he succumbs to Socrates. On this view, being pious is dependent upon the attitudes of the Greek gods. It is in virtue of being loved by the gods that an action is pious. Not so on the Socratic view. On that view the action has a certain property, being pious, quite independently of the gods’ attitudes. Indeed, it is as a result of detecting the property of being pious that the gods come to love the action.

The disagreement here is a metaphysical one and concerns the status of the property of being pious. Is the property, as Euthyphro contends, what I call a ‘conferred’ property, i.e., does the gods’ love confer the property on the action? Or is Socrates right and the action pious quite independently of the gods and their attitudes?

While I don’t have a particular interest in the property of being pious, I do have an interest in conferred properties more generally and the question how one would go about showing that a certain property is conferred. How would one go about siding with Euthyphro on the question of being pious, for example? In this chapter I show how one can appeal to the notion of response-dependence, a notion much discussed in the recent philosophical literature to offer a conferral

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2 The standard works are Mark Johnston’s “Objectivity Refigured: Pragmatism without Verificationism” in *Reality, Representation, and Projection*, ed. by John Haldane and Crispin Wright (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993); Philip Pettit’s
account of a property. This shows how a response-dependence account can yield metaphysical results, as opposed to merely epistemological or semantical results, but this issue has been much debated in the literature on response-dependence. More importantly, though, the way is paved for showing that a particular property is conferred. Here we arrive both at the main goal of the chapter and the goal of the larger project of which the chapter is a part. The larger project is motivated by a general interest in taking a certain post-Kantian intuition seriously, an intuition to the effect that ordinary objects are in some way constructed by, or dependent upon, human thought or practices. The goal of this larger project is to find a clear, coherent, articulation of this intuition. The articulation that I offer is in the form of a key component in a constructivist conferral account of the individuation of objects. A central piece in that account of the individuation of objects is a conferral account of essentiality—the property of being an essential property of an object—which incorporates certain constructivist elements and is therefore properly called a constructivist account of essentiality. Then, on the assumption that objects are individuated by their essential properties, we get a constructivist account of the individuation of objects. But this is looking far ahead. Now we must concern ourselves with how in general to articulate a conferral account of a property.

This chapter has the following structure. First I will discuss what a response-dependence account of a concept involves. Then I will show how one gets from a response-dependence account of a concept to a conferral account of the property the concept is about. That step requires a certain view of the relationship between concepts and properties and I discuss certain worries that arise about that view. The resulting picture is a model that I hope that anyone who wants to articulate

"Realism and Response-Dependence", in Mind, October, 1991; Crispin Wright's Truth and Objectivity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992). By now there is a whole body of literature on response-dependence and its relation to various topics in metaethics, aesthetics, philosophy of mind and language, epistemology and metaphysics.
some kind of conferralism about properties should find interesting and useful. My final remarks concern the uses of such a response-dependence account of concepts for a specifically anti-realist constructivist project.

**Response-dependence: the various aims and purposes**

The notion of response-dependence has received considerable attention in recent philosophical literature although there is scarcely any consensus about what a response-dependence account of something involves. Some take it to be a *semantic* account of the role of our responses in how the reference of our *terms* get fixed. Others take a response-dependence account to serve an *epistemic* function by providing a non-reductive analysis or elucidation of our *concepts*, where concepts are characterized as the core of a cluster or set of beliefs about objects or properties. My aim here, however, is to show how a response-dependence account can have *metaphysical* upshot, how offering a response-dependence account can yield conclusions about the status of *properties* and not merely about our *concepts* of those properties, or about how the *reference* of our terms get fixed.

What kind of response-dependence account do I then intend to offer? Consider first the possibility that a semantic response-dependence account might yield metaphysical results. Take, e.g., the predicate ‘is pious’ and the thesis that the gods’ attitudes are implicated in fixing what property the predicate stands for. Does that entail that the property in question is conferred? No, it does not. The response-dependence of the predicate ‘is pious’ is entirely compatible with the Socratic view that being pious is not a conferred property. The response-dependence of the predicate ‘is pious’ ensures that the gods’ attitudes determine that ‘is pious’ stands for *being pious*.

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3 Pettit’s is a key example of such an account; *op. cit.*
4 Johnston’s is an example of such an account; *op. cit.*
rather than being schmious or being schlious. But that is compatible with the Socratic story according to which an action has the property of being pious or schmious or schlious quite independently of the gods and their attitudes. It is, thus, clear that a semantic account, according to which our attitudes or responses are implicated in fixing the reference of certain terms yields no conclusions about the status of that which is referred to. So offering a response-dependence account of our predicates is not going to yield that the properties these predicates stand for are conferred.

What about a response-dependence account of the concept of being pious, where the concept is characterized as a cluster of beliefs about the property of being pious? Does such a response-dependence account of a concept yield that the property it is about is conferred? One might think that it does not. For isn’t it the case that an account of our concepts is merely an account of how we think of the world, and not an account of what the world is like? And if so, isn’t it clear that a response-dependence account of the concept of being pious can yield no conclusions about the property of being pious, but only about how we think of that property? Doesn’t it seem that no metaphysical upshot can be had from a response-dependence account of our concepts?

Not so. As I will show, the above argument rests crucially on an assumption about the relation between concepts and the properties they are about. If one rejects that assumption, a response-dependence account of a concept yields a conferral account of the property the concept is about. Metaphysical upshot is indeed to be had from a response-dependence account of our concepts.

A RESPONSE-DEPENDENCE ACCOUNT OF CONCEPTS

The term 'response-dependence' was coined by Mark Johnston in 1986\(^5\) to draw a distinction

between two types of concept. Johnston’s main motivation for the distinction was to account for the difference between concepts of primary qualities, such as that of shape and size, and concepts of secondary qualities, such as that of colors and tastes. At the time there was a renewed general interest in the primary/secondary quality distinction and it also seemed that accounts of other qualities, such as aesthetic or ethical qualities, could benefit from a comparison with secondary qualities. It is in such a context that Johnston puts forward his account and his explicit aim is to investigate whether concepts of some properties, in particular secondary qualities, are intimately linked with concepts of human responses. An account of response-dependence that can be used to carve out a distinction between primary and secondary quality concepts will then also provide a model that can be used to argue for the claim that other kinds of concepts are to be thought of on a par with secondary quality concepts, with whatever consequences that entails. My primary concern here, of course, is not the use of the notion of response-dependence to draw a distinction between primary and secondary quality concepts, but rather how a response-dependence account of concepts can be used in an anti-realist account of properties.

I will present a response-dependence account of concepts that owes a lot to Johnston’s work, but differs from his approach in significant respects.

As I see it, a response-dependence account of a concept is a latter day conceptual analysis. The aim

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6 See e.g. his “Objectivity Refigured”.
is to show how concepts of properties that on the face of it do not involve the responses or attitudes of subjects are in fact intimately linked with concepts that carry their response-dependence on their sleeves. What is this intimate link? On Johnston's conception the aim is in fact to show that the concepts in question are identical. The criterion for identity of concepts is, however, not the traditional one where a concept F is identical to concept G just in case the terms that express the concepts are synonymous. There are two main reasons why the synonymy criterion is inappropriate. The first is a general concern, the second is of particular concern to the response-dependence theorist. First, the synonymy criterion is a criterion of identity of concepts in terms of identity of meaning of terms. This is fine if one wants to identify concepts with meanings of terms. To do so is, however, to subscribe to a substantial philosophical thesis. On the other hand, if one wants to keep a distinction between concepts and meanings of terms, then one has only offered an epistemic criterion of the identity of concepts—a way of telling when concepts are identical—but not an account of what determines the identity itself. One has, in other words, merely offered a way to detect the symptoms of the identity of concepts, but not given a constitutive criterion. The other, and more serious, problem with the synonymy criterion is that it is too narrow. The traditional way of understanding synonymy is to say that terms $T_1$ and $T_2$ are synonymous just in case they can be substituted for each other in all contexts without loss of truth. Other Quinean worries about the notion of synonymy aside, it seems that substitutivity *salva veritate* is too stringent a criterion, especially for the theorist who wants to show

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8 That thesis may or may not be motivated by the idea that a metaphysical inquiry into the nature of concepts is best approached through semantics.


that one concept is, despite first appearances, identical to another concept. For, if the synonymy
criterion were to serve as a criterion for the identity of concepts, then it seems that there would be
no open question\(^\text{12}\) as to whether the concepts were identical. Either they would be obviously
identical or obviously not. Where there is no room for disagreement, there is no room for theory,
of the response-dependence kind or any other.

I will follow Johnston in rejecting synonymy as the criterion of identity for concepts. On his
view\(^\text{13}\) two concepts are identical just in case they have the same \textit{a priori} conditions of application.
What are the \textit{a priori} conditions of application for a concept? There is a way of understanding
such conditions that raises the same problems for the response-dependence theorist as the
synonymy criterion does. I do not know if this is Johnston’s own preferred way of understanding
them, but we do not need to settle that issue.\(^\text{14}\) On this understanding, the \textit{a priori} conditions of
application constitute the norms each concept-user consciously adheres to when applying the
concept to an object. This requires that the application conditions be immediately accessible
epistemically and thus it seems, again, that there is no open question whether the application
conditions of one concept are the same as the application conditions of another. Again, there
seems no room for a response-dependence account of a concept.

The above understanding of the application conditions of a concept is, however, also implausible
for unrelated reasons. It just is implausible that there is any such measuring stick each and every
concept-user checks when deciding whether to apply a concept to an object or not. I believe there
is a way to refine the notion of application conditions to take care of that worry by understanding

\(^{13}\) “Objectivity Refigured”, p. 103.
\(^{14}\) Philip Pettit takes this view of Johnston’s application conditions in his “Realism and Response-Dependence”,
the application conditions of a concept to be the standard each concept user is guided by, *consciously or implicitly*, in their use of the concept. These application conditions would still be knowable *a priori* in the sense that given sufficient prodding the concept users would acknowledge to be committed to these standards, similarly to a patient who owns up to her desires and fears on the psychoanalyst’s couch. However, that is not the route I want to take here. Instead I want to give up on the idea of individuating concepts in terms of their application conditions and instead make use of something I call *concept commitments*. Although in focusing on concept commitments I am departing from Johnston’s own account of response-dependence, it fits quite nicely with the rest of his account. In fact, I believe it fits even better with it, given how Johnston wants to answer the question of how to individuate application conditions. Johnston’s own suggestion is that concepts F and G have the same application conditions just in case they share the same *non-negotiable beliefs*. The idea is that a concept is characterized by a cluster of beliefs and some of those beliefs are negotiable and others not. The application conditions are individuated by the set of non-negotiable beliefs. What determines that a belief is non-negotiable is that we would not know what talk involving the concepts in question amounted to on the hypothesis that the belief were false.\textsuperscript{15} For instance, we would not know what talk of bachelors amounted to on the hypothesis that some bachelors are not male. Similarly, we would not know what talk of being red or of red things amounted to on the hypothesis that something is red and yet not colored.\textsuperscript{16} What is the difference between the notion of being non-negotiable and those of being knowable *a priori* or being necessary? A belief that is non-negotiable is in principle knowable *a priori*, i.e., given

\textsuperscript{15} “Objectivity Refigured”, p. 103.

\textsuperscript{16} Someone might object now that it is not a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept red that if something is red, then it is colored, and give the example of someone being described as being red because of her leftist political beliefs, as Rosa Luxemburg was (“Red Rosa”). To make the objection even crisper one might say that Rosa’s beliefs were red, though not colored. But clearly the correct response to such an objection is to insist that such usage of the term “red” involves a different concept from our ordinary color concept.
sufficient prodding one is to be able to own up to holding the belief. The apriority is, however, not to be merely as a result of the fixing of the reference of the term, such as when I dub my cat “Kisa” and then claim to know a priori that my cat is called “Kisa”. I have something slightly stronger in mind. A belief is non-negotiable when it underlies a practice, is presupposed or assumed by that practice. But it need not be necessary in any deep sense: it may be necessary to the practice in the sense of being presupposed by the practice, but nevertheless not necessary simpliciter. What do I have in mind here? Let’s say, for example, that the belief that bachelors are human males is a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept of being a bachelor. Arguably, it is knowable a priori, since given sufficient prodding one would own up to holding that belief. It is also presupposed by the practice of applying the concept of being a bachelor, but one might not think that it is necessary in any deep sense—that bachelors’ being human is fixed by some metaphysical glue. This difference between a belief’s being necessary and its being non-negotiable is important. The notion of non-negotiableness is considerably less rigid; we can even conceive a belief’s non-negotiableness getting eroded with slight changes in conceptual practices over time.17

I am understanding the set of non-negotiable beliefs to be the set of beliefs concept users are committed to being true when they apply the concept. Those beliefs need not be conscious, but the hypothesis that such a belief is false threatens to make the practice of applying the concept incoherent or empty: we would not know what our practice of applying the concept amounted to on the hypothesis that the belief were false.

17 Consider, e.g., the case of the, at first metaphorical, use of the concept of bachelor as applied to male cats, a use that then starts over time to change the practice of applying the concept bachelor. Over time, the belief that bachelors were human would then cease to be a non-negotiable belief. Given that concepts are individuated by the non-negotiable beliefs associated with the concept this would amount to a change in concepts.
What we have here is an account of concepts as individuated by their concept commitments which just are the set of non-negotiable beliefs associated with the concepts. This account of concepts simplifies the response-dependence account, since we don't need to argue for the claim that application conditions—the norms concept users are guided by—are to be individuated by the set of non-negotiable beliefs. However, we may worry that this simplification has the effect of cutting concepts up too coarsely. Consider, e.g., the concepts of being a trilateral enclosed plane figure and being a triangular enclosed plane figure. If we were to individuate concepts by their application conditions, understood as the norms the concept user is guided by in applying the concept, we could see that the norms associated with the concept of being trilateral are different from the norms associated with the concept of being triangular, and hence they should be two different concepts. However, the non-negotiable beliefs underlying the use of these concepts is the same: would we know what the use of the concept of being triangular amounted to on the hypothesis that something was triangular, yet not trilateral? According to the non-negotiable criterion, they are the same concept. But that is just what I want. I don’t dispute that the application conditions account of concepts is useful for some purposes. What I am after here is, however, precisely to capture what we are committed to in using our concepts. The non-negotiable criterion thus fits perfectly for my purpose.

Let us now see what a response-dependence account of a concept would involve, given the conception of the identity of concepts inherited from Johnston, with the modifications I have indicated. The aim here is to elucidate the concept in question by showing that, contrary to what one might have thought, it is in fact identical to a concept of being responded to in certain ways by subjects. The concepts that carry their response-dependence nature on their sleeve can be of
various kinds, depending on the response in question and the conditions under which such response is to take place. To take just two examples, Johnston is particularly interested in concepts of dispositions, whereas Wright’s interest lies in concepts, dispositional or not, that are such that the response in question is judgment. Euthyphro would, of course, be interested in the response of the gods’ love. In general we can say that the concept $F$ is a response-dependent concept just in case the following holds:\(^{18}\)

$$
\text{The concept } F = \text{the concept of inducing response } R \text{ in subjects } S \text{ under conditions } C.
$$

Special attention must be paid to giving a substantial characterization of $R$, $S$, and $C$, lest we trivialize the account. To illustrate this last point consider the example of the concept $red$:

$$
\text{The concept } red = \text{the concept of being disposed to look red to ideal observers under ideal conditions}
$$

If we don’t give a substantial specification of ideal observers and ideal conditions, then we open ourselves up to the trivial reading of those notions, namely, where an observer and conditions are ideal just in case something looks red to the observers in those conditions when it is in fact red. The concept of being disposed to look red when being red is not a response-dependent concept in the sense intended.

It will be important for my argument that the concepts we are concerned with are concepts of properties, such as being red or being furious, and not concepts of particulars, such as Aristotle, or concepts of stuffs, such as water. To avoid confusion, I will talk about the concept of being red, not the concept of redness.\(^{19}\)

\(^{18}\) “Objectivity Refigured”, p. 103.
\(^{19}\) This distinction is generally not adhered to in the literature, by Johnston or others.
Now, to show that a particular concept is response-dependent, one needs to show that it has the same concept commitments as some concept that clearly is response-dependent, which it does just in case the non-negotiable beliefs associated with each concept represent the properties they stand for as satisfying the same conditions.

In other words, one needs to show that the two concepts involve the non-negotiable belief that something has one of the properties just in case it has the other. To put this more crisply, one needs to show that the appropriate biconditional is a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept F:

\[ x \text{ is } P_F \iff x \text{ induces response } R \text{ in subjects } S \text{ under conditions } C. \]

If we take the example of the concept red and the concept of being disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions, then one needs to show that the biconditional:

\[ x \text{ is red iff } x \text{ is disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions} \]

is a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept red. Care needs to be taken to decide what kind of response-dependent concept the concept red is to be identified with, which depends on the kind of subjective response and conditions in question. In the example above, of course, the concept is to be identified with a response-dispositional concept, namely, the concept of being disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions. Care needs also to be taken in specifying what looking red amounts to in a way that does not make the analysis circular, but we need not dwell on that now.

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\[ P_F \text{ is the property the concept } F \text{ is of.} \]
THE THEORY AT WORK

Johnston's project was, in the first instance, to investigate whether one can account for the difference between primary and secondary quality concepts by showing how secondary quality concepts are really identical to response-dependent concepts, whereas primary quality concepts are not. We now know how the argument would run. Consider the concept *red* and the concept *square*. If the concept *red* is response-dependent, then it is a non-negotiable belief about being red that something is red just in case it is disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions. This is a non-negotiable belief about being red, so the argument would run, because we would not know what talk of being red amounted to on the hypothesis that the belief were false. It is thus a condition on the application of the concept *red* to something that it look red to normal observers under normal conditions, which is also a condition of application for the dispositional concept. The concepts have the same concept commitments; what we have is one and the same concept.

Compare with the concept *square*: if the concept square is not response-dependent, it is *not* a non-negotiable belief about being square that something is square just in case it is disposed to look square to normal observers under normal conditions. We can tell stories where this is false, but where we still manage to know what we are thinking and talking about. For instance, we can imagine a scenario where it is discovered that all normal observers have until now seen a very distorted view of squares and once our visual systems have been extended to include some special visual aid, we can all see what squares really look like, just as we now know that pure gold is really white and can see that it is so in a good laboratory. It is thus not a condition of application

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21 Here I use Johnston's own dispositional account as the example.
of the concept *square* to something that it look square to normal observers under normal conditions. It may be true that, as a matter of fact, all and only square things look square to normal observers under normal conditions but something's looking square to such normal observers under normal conditions is not a condition of applying the concept to the thing in question.

It would not be detrimental to Johnston’s project if the reader were to disagree about how to account for the concept *square*. The point is that the non-negotiableness criterion distinguishes between response-dependent and response-independent concepts and that distinction can be used to account for the distinction between primary and secondary quality concepts even if a concept, which has traditionally been conceived as a primary quality concept, falls on the response-dependence side. For it is open to us to say that that's where the line should be drawn, that we were mistaken about on which side of the line the concept *square* falls and that the concept in question is, after all, a secondary quality concept. Equipped with the distinction between response-dependent concepts and response-independent ones and a good working criterion for that distinction, one can then inquire into the concept commitments of any concept. If such an enquiry reveals that there is a non-negotiable belief to the effect that what the concept stands for is dependent upon human responses, then the concept in question is a response-dependent one. If it doesn’t, it is response-independent.

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22 In fact, Johnston himself does not think that our ordinary concept red is a response-dependent one, but advocates that we adopt new color concepts that are response-dependent. This is Johnston’s Prescriptive Protagoreanism. But since Johnston’s own use of his response-dependence account is not of my main concern here, I will bypass this issue now.
FROM CONCEPTS TO PROPERTIES: THE PRECISE LOCATION OF THE REALIST/ANTI-REALIST DISAGREEMENT

On the kind of response-dependence account we are concerned with, a concept is response-dependent in virtue of what it is *of* or *about*, namely, if what it is about is a property of inducing subjective responses in given conditions. Such an account should be contrasted with a response-dependence account where a concept is response-dependent, not in virtue of the qualities possessed by what it is about, but in virtue of some other qualities it has, such as the way it represents what it is about, or the way in which the semantic link between the concept and what it is about is fixed. For instance, on a semantic response-dependence account, a term is response-dependent because some responses, human or divine, play a role in how the reference of the term gets fixed.23

Because our response-dependent concepts are response-dependent in virtue of what they are concepts of it is clear how a general strategy for teasing out metaphysical results from a response-dependence account of a concept would go. Consider our favorite concept *red* and how one would go about drawing conclusions about the property of being red from the fact that the concept red is response-dependent. Since the concept red is, by hypothesis, response-dependent an appropriate biconditional is a non-negotiable belief. Let’s assume, for the sake of argument, that the following biconditional is a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept red:

\[ x \text{ is red iff } x \text{ is disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions.} \]

What does that tell us about the property itself? Doesn’t the fact that the concept involves that

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23 I am not using ‘term’ in a technical sense, and intend to include predicates as terms. I also take the reference of a predicate to be a property.

24 Where conditions of normalcy are specified substantially and it is articulated in a non-circular manner what *looking red* amounts to.
non-negotiable belief show that the property itself is a dispositional property? Can the non-negotiable beliefs associated with a concept be mistaken about what the property they are about is like? In my view, they cannot. In fact, it is here that the disagreement between a certain kind of realist and anti-realist emerges. Let us look at the argument in some detail.

Let's assume again that the concept red is response-dependent, and that from that we claim that the property of being red is a response-dispositional property. The realist's objection here is not that the concept isn't response-dependent. By hypothesis, he agrees that it is. What he objects to is that anything follows from that about the property. His objections can take one of the following forms:

First, he could object that the concept is misrepresenting reality. The claim here would be that the non-negotiable beliefs associated with the concept represented the property as being one way, but the property itself isn't like that. For instance, the non-negotiable beliefs might represent the property as being such that \( x \) is \( P \_F \) iff \( x \) is \( P \_G \), when in fact it is not the case that \( x \) is \( P \_F \) iff \( x \) is \( P \_G \).

But such a claim is surely quite suspicious. How, and on what grounds, could one claim that a certain property does not conform to our non-negotiable beliefs about it? Let's be mindful that we are not talking about any old beliefs, but our non-negotiable beliefs about the property. Take the concept red. If we acknowledge that the response-dependence account of the concept red is right and that the concept does indeed involve the non-negotiable belief that something is red iff it is disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions, then how is one able to claim that the property red is, after all, not so? How could one claim that something could be red, yet not be disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions?
There are two worries here, one semantic, the other epistemic:

The semantic worry concerns how one could be using the term 'red' in attempting to make such a claim. If one used it in the normal way, one would succeed in talking about our property, being red; if one used it in some unorthodox way, one would, at best, succeed in talking about some other property; at worst, one would be talking about nothing at all. It just doesn't seem that one can coherently make such a claim about our property of being red.

The epistemic worry concerns the grounds for the supposed claim. What epistemic access does one have to the property red such that one can claim that the non-negotiable beliefs associated with our concept red, i.e., the core of our beliefs about red, misrepresent the property itself? Both the semantic worry and the epistemic worry are fueled by the belief that the claim that the concept misrepresents the property rests on problematic assumptions about our semantic and epistemic access to properties independently of our concepts. Such assumptions have frequently been associated with a “God’s-eye” realist view of what inhabits reality and a corresponding radical skepticism about our access to those inhabitants. The position that I advocate involves the commitment that the non-negotiable beliefs about a property represent the property as it really is, provided these beliefs are consistent. Given that position, an argument for the claim that a certain concept is response-dependent is *ipso facto* an argument for the claim that something has the property that the concept is about just in case it is responded to in the requisite way, not merely as a matter of fact, but non-negotiably so. In other words, the argument for the response-dependence of the concept is *ipso facto* an argument for the claim that the property it is about is conferred.
Questioning the thesis that the non-negotiable beliefs associated with our concepts represent the properties as they really are is, however, precisely what a certain other kind of realist wants to do. This is the second kind of objection a realist could offer and it is slightly weaker than the first one. This objection is not that our concepts misrepresent reality, but rather that an analysis or elucidation of a concept is just that: it tells us about how we think or conceive of the property, but not about the property itself. In this case, the objection takes the form of insisting that a concept can be response-dependent although the property it is supposedly about is not.

Consider the two concepts of having Ishani’s favorite mathematical property and of being a perfect number. Let’s assume that Ishani’s favorite mathematical property is that of being a perfect number. Isn’t it the case, then, that both the concept of having Ishani’s favorite mathematical property and of being a perfect number are about the same property, namely of being a perfect number? But if so, then the concept having Ishani’s favorite mathematical property represents the property it stands for as being response-dependent, since it is a non-negotiable belief about the property that something has it just in case Ishani has a certain attitude towards it. On the other hand, the property of being perfect isn’t response-dependent and whether a certain number is perfect certainly does not depend on what the attitudes of a particular individual are. If its divisors add up to the number then it is perfect, if not, it is not perfect, pace Ishani and her attitudes. Hence, the response-dependence of concepts does not yield the desired conclusions about the properties these concepts are about.

My response to this objection is that we don’t merely have two concepts here, we have two properties. Having Ishani’s favorite mathematical property and being a perfect number are two properties. If Ishani changes her tastes and starts to favor the property of being a Mersenne prime then the number six ceases to have Ishani’s favorite mathematical property, but continues to be perfect. Hence, the two properties are not identical although something can have both at some time. Furthermore, the property a particular concept is about, as I am using that relation of

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25 Ironically, sometimes this view is taken to be influenced by a certain reading of Kant, according to which we can only know things as they are for us, and not as they are in themselves. Cf., e.g., recent comments by E. J. Lowe in The Possibility of Metaphysics (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 23 ff. and Michael Loux in Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 6 ff.

26 A version of this argument is to be found in Ralph Wedgwood’s “The Essence of Response-Dependence”, European Review of Philosophy, vol. 3 (1998), p. 37.

27 A number is perfect just in case it equals the sum of its divisors. The first three perfect numbers are 6 (= 1 + 2 + 3), 28 (= 1 + 2 + 4 + 7 + 14), and 496 (= 1 + 2 + 4 + 8 + 16 + 31 + 62 + 124 + 248).

28 When a number m = 2^n-1 is prime it is said to be a ‘Mersenne prime’.
aboutness, is the property specified by the non-negotiable beliefs. In the case above, the non-negotiable beliefs associated with the concept having Ishani's favorite mathematical property do not single out being perfect, precisely because we can imagine a scenario in which something is perfect but does not have Ishani's favorite mathematical property. Similarly, we can imagine a scenario in which something has Ishani's favorite mathematical property but isn't perfect: the number five is a Mersenne prime, but despite that distinction it isn't perfect.

It is the close relationship between concepts and the properties they are about that this other kind of realist critic is likely to object to. On the view he subscribes to, the relationship between concepts and properties is not particularly close and there can be more than one concept of the same property. Moreover, his conception may allow for property identities to be discovered by empirical investigation, such as being hot = having a certain amount of molecular motion and being water = having molecular structure H₂O. On this realist critic's conception, the relationship between concepts and the properties they are about is akin to the relationship between concepts of particulars and the particulars they are about, such as the concept of Aristotle and Aristotle. On the conception I adhere to, there is a marked difference between the relationship between concepts of properties and the properties they are about on the one hand and concepts of particulars and those particulars on the other.

Are the two conceptions of concepts and properties really at odds or is it merely a verbal dispute?


30 Hilary Putnam discusses this conception and contrasts it with what he takes to be a more traditional way to think of concepts and properties in his essay "On Properties", Mathematics, Matter, and Method. Philosophical Papers, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). It is the more traditional way to think of concepts and properties that I adhere to. Note that I can allow for identities such as water = H₂O, but they are identities of stuffs, and not properties.

31 I do not wish to rule out that someone could want to keep a close connection between concepts and both the properties and the particulars they are about. I am, however, not advocating such a view here.
I think it is more than a verbal dispute; it concerns how close the ties are between our concepts of properties and the properties themselves. The difference between the positions has epistemic implications as well as metaphysical. On the conception that I adhere to there is a very close relationship between our concepts and the properties these concepts are about: the non-negotiable beliefs not only individuate the concepts, but the properties as well. As the slogan could go: *The properties are mere shadows of the concepts*. We can consider this to be a modest conceptualism about properties. It is a form of conceptualism because on this view the properties conform to our non-negotiable beliefs about them: properties conform to our concepts of them; not the other way around. The echo of Kant's "Copernican" revolution is deliberate here. This means that properties are carved rather finely: there is a property for each concept. For instance, the property of being made of $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ and the property of being water turn out to be two distinct properties, if the concept of being made of $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ and the concept of being water differ in their non-negotiable beliefs. Note, however, that this is consistent with holding that $\text{H}_2\text{O}$, the stuff is identical to water, the stuff. I call this conceptualism "modest" because the metaphysical commitments at issue are modest, since nothing need be said about the status of the properties, except that for every coherent concept there is a property. Even an old-fashioned rationalist realist could subscribe to modest conceptualism, as well as someone who thought that properties were creatures of the mind.

Now, I submit that if one subscribes to a such a conceptualism about properties, then a response-dependence account of a concept is *ipso facto* a conferral account of the property the concept is

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32 Cf. the Preface to the B edition of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: "...we suppose that our representation of things, as they are given to us, does not conform to these things as they are in themselves, but that these objects, as appearances, conform to our mode of representation..." (B xx). Norman Kemp Smith, transl. (London: Macmillan and Co, 1929); Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1781A and 1787B).
about. But is conceptualism about properties too high a price to pay for someone interested in offering a conferral account of a property? One might think it is. Consider the following objection:\(^3^3\)

Your conceptualism might seem rather unattractive. It seems that you are committed to saying some unhappy things. For instance, would you also claim that the concept of being-the-same-object-as Hesperus and of being-the-same-object-as-Phosphorus are of distinct properties? If not, why not? If so, are you then not committed to denying that Hesperus = Phosphorus? This is not just a standard philosophical assumption, it's in astronomy textbooks.

The position I advocate does not find itself in these dire straits. There are several ways to respond to this objection.

First of all, one might choose to be conceptualist about some properties, but not others. For instance, one might want to be conceptualist about all “non-natural” properties,\(^3^4\) but realist about others. I suspect many readers would be attracted to this option.

Secondly, it is clear that to be conceptualist about all properties one needs to be committed to the view that the concept of being-the-same-object-as-Hesperus and the concept of being-the-same-object-as-Phosphorus are concepts of two distinct properties. Since properties are shadows of concepts, if one wanted to claim that they were concepts of the same property, then one would have to show that they shared the same non-negotiable beliefs. Given that it was a major empirical discovery that something has the property of being-the-same-as-Hesperus just in case it has the property of being-the-same-as-Phosphorus, this is a very unattractive route. Since the identity statement Hesperus = Phosphorus is knowable only \textit{a posteriori}, the biconditional

\[ x \text{ is-the-same-as-Hesperus} \iff x \text{ is-the-same-as-Phosphorus} \]

\(^3^1\) Thanks to Stephen Yablo.
\(^3^4\) Such properties must be defined independently of the the considerations pertaining to the response-dependence status of the concept of the property if one wants to use the argument outlined in this chapter to argue for the claim that the property in question is conferred.
must be so also. Hence it is not a non-negotiable belief associated with the concepts in question. Hundreds of sessions on the semanticoanalyst's couch are not going to reveal anything different. If the biconditional isn't knowable a priori, then it isn't non-negotiable and hence the concepts in question aren't identical.

However, the claim that what we have here are two different concepts of two different properties does not force one to deny that Hesperus = Phosphorus:

First, one can say that being the same object as Hesperus is a different property from being the same object as Phosphorus, but deny that this commits one to holding that Hesperus, the object, is not identical to Phosphorus, the object. There seems to me nothing wrong with this option. In fact, it underscores the epistemic ties we have with the properties that inhabit our world. If one welcomes those epistemic ties, one should welcome this option.35

Secondly, one can say that being the same object as Hesperus and being the same object as Phosphorus are bogus properties, either because they essentially involve particulars in their individuation or because they involve the identity relation. The claim would be that these properties are somehow impure. There is a long history of making a distinction between properties in this way, but a lot more needs to be said to make a distinction between pure and impure properties, and to show that such a distinction is compatible with a modest conceptualism. I won't undertake that here. I merely want to note these possible lines of response to guard against the fear that conceptualism of this sort is simply and obviously too high a price to pay for anyone wishing to get a conferral account of a property from a response-dependence account of the

35 This option is available irrespective of ones theory of names, except only the most extreme versions of the direct reference theory of names, although it may go more naturally with a neo-Fregean account of names.
concept of that property. Euthyphro and his friends in the twenty-first century may even find it a particularly attractive position. But it should be clear that if one wants to reject the claim that a response-dependence account of concepts yields metaphysical conclusions about the properties these concepts are about, it is exactly at this point in the development that one should object.

**Conferred Properties**

I have argued that a response-dependence account of a concept can yield metaphysical conclusions about the property the concept is about, if a modest conceptualism about properties is assumed. It is now time to turn to the question whether the metaphysical conclusions are that the property in question is *conferred*.

Let's start with the concept red and a response-dependence account of that concept according to which the following biconditional is a non-negotiable belief:

\[ x \text{ is red} \iff x \text{ is disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions}. \]

I argued before that this shows that the property of being red is a response-dispositional property. But is it conferred? Do the normal observers confer the property of being red on the object in question? Is it in virtue of the fact that the object in question is disposed to look red to normal observers under normal conditions that it is red? Yes, it is: for something to be red *just is* for it to be disposed to be responded to in the relevant ways by normal observers. It is the normal observers' responses that confer the property of being red on the object, according to that analysis. If the biconditional is non-negotiable, then the property of being red is a conferred property.
Euthyphro’s case is even crisper. Consider what it would be for the concept *pious* to be response-dependent, as I have characterized the notion. This would mean that the concept *pious* is such that it involves a biconditional of the following kind as a non-negotiable belief:

\[ x \text{ is pious iff } x \text{ induces love in the Greek gods.} \]

Euthyphro should, according to our story, be committed to the view that it is unclear what talk of being pious would amount to on the hypothesis that this belief were false. For instance, it is to be unclear what we would be talking about if we said that someone’s action were pious, yet not loved by the gods. Isn’t this a way to flesh out Euthyphro’s initial position? I think it is. If Euthyphro wants to claim that the property of being pious is a conferred property, he should insist to be mystified as to what talk involving the concept of being pious amounts to, on the hypothesis that the relevant biconditional is false. If being pious is a property conferred on an action in virtue of the attitudes the gods have to it, what would it mean to say that, say, Euthyphro’s own action towards his father was pious, yet not loved by the gods? Euthyphro should be happy with the position we attribute to him here.

Socrates should also be happy with his lot. On this analysis, Socrates should be committed to the view that it makes perfectly good and quite unmysterious sense to talk about being pious on the hypothesis that the relevant biconditional is false. According to our story, Socrates should insist, and probably would happily insist, that, say, Hypatia’s actions could be pious, yet not loved by the gods.\(^{36}\)

I thus conclude that offering a response-dependence account of a concept, and adhering to a modest conceptualism about properties, is a way to side with Euthyphro about being pious as

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\(^{36}\) Unless Socrates thinks the gods are omniscient, but let’s put that possibility aside.
well as any other property. Such an account yields that the property in question is conferred.

**WHEREITO NOW?**

Let us take stock. I have argued that one can give a conferral account of a certain property by arguing that the concept of the property is response-dependent, if one is willing to assume conceptualism about that property. I have stressed that one need not accept conceptualism whole-sale and that selectivity is permitted. In conclusion I want to offer a couple of remarks on the status of a response-dependence account of a concept and its uses for an anti-realist project.

First the status of the account:

Since this kind of response-dependence account is offered at the level of concepts, an opponent can only offer two kinds of objection. Firstly, he can object to the account as an account of our ordinary concept $F$; he can say that in fact our ordinary concept $F$ does not involve such a non-negotiable belief and thus reject the response-dependence account of the concept $F$ as empirically flawed. This first line of objection open to the opponent of a response-dependence theorist is certainly coherent, and it seems quite clear what would settle the dispute. It might take considerable self-examination to discover what the concept commitments are, but ultimately such examination should reveal either that the concept involves the non-negotiable belief or that it does not.

Secondly, the opponent can admit that the response-dependence account does in fact capture our ordinary concept $F$; the concept does in fact involve such a non-negotiable belief. Unfortunately, however, this is merely an accurate account of our concepts, nothing more. He will deny that we have the same epistemic access to properties that the modest conceptualism I
am advocating allows for. But denying that epistemic access is itself a substantive philosophical position. And unless it is supported by substantial philosophical argument, it is a substantial philosophical assumption and cannot by itself be used as a conclusive argument against someone who does not share that assumption. More work would be needed.

Finally I turn to the question what role there might be for a conferral account of a property in an anti-realist project which is fueled by the desire to take seriously the idea that an aspect of the world might be dependent upon us, our thought, or our practices. Not all anti-realist projects are fueled by such desire, but consider those that are. Consider, e.g., someone who feels that way about the aesthetic aspect of the world or the moral. Could that intuition be articulated as the claim that aesthetic or moral properties are conferred? It seems to me that it would depend on the particular anti-realist project at issue. An anti-realist who is also anti-naturalist and who wants to give an account of the properties in question as mind-dependent in some strong sense might not think that conferralism about the property was strong enough for their purposes. On the other hand, someone who is chiefly interested in capturing a certain direction of fit—from us to the world, as it were—might be quite content with conferralism as it stands. Conferralism about a property is first and foremost a claim about the direction of fit. What has been offered here is, however, not merely a way to state the claim that a certain property is conferred, but to argue for it as well, and the machinery introduced for that purpose incorporates assumptions that one need not make if one's chief aim is simply to argue that a certain property is conferred, where that claim is to be compatible with certain realist or naturalist projects. Because of the conceptualism that need be assumed for the argument to go through, what is offered here is a way to argue for conferralism about a property as part of a clearly anti-realist project. These anti-realist projects
may differ quite drastically in scope and aims, depending on what is to be conferred and who is to do the honors. In the next chapter we will see one such project underway.
Essentiality conferred

An argument from response-dependence for a constructivist conferral account of what makes a property essential to an object

INTRODUCTION

Is this puddle of water essentially made of H$_2$O? Is Ted Kennedy essentially from the sperm and egg of his actual parents, viz. Rose and Joe Kennedy? Is my dining table essentially four-legged? Is Arnold Schwarzenegger essentially human? Could he have been a machine? A fly?

Questions about the essential properties of things are a staple of contemporary philosophical discussion, but not so long ago any mention of essence or essential properties would have been met with skepticism, if not ridicule. Recall, for example, Quine's discussion of the three grades of modal involvement:

The first two grades need not concern us here, but they involve necessity in virtue of form and necessity in virtue of meaning. What is of interest to us is the third grade, which involves necessity in virtue of something about the object itself, irrespective of the form or content of the words we use to describe it. For example, it calls for some property to be necessary to the inventor of bifocals, viz. Benjamin Franklin, irrespective of the way we refer to or think about him. This third grade of modal involvement was highly troubling to Quine, because it appeared to involve a commitment to necessity de re and therefore, he claimed, to Aristotelian essentialism and all the trappings of scholastic metaphysics. This seemed to be a wholly unacceptable commitment: For the source of this de re necessity—what made the property necessary to an object—could not be accounted for in a way congenial to the empiricism of the

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38 Of course, given Quine's concerns about analyticity, the second grade of modal involvement was troubling to him as well, but we need not go into that here.
day.

It is this third grade of modal involvement, so vilified by Quine, which I will give an account of. What is more, my account goes some way towards accommodating the sources of Quinean skepticism about essentiality. By contrast, most contemporary essentialists are realist in the sense that they believe that what makes a property essential to an object is independent of human thought and practices. What I offer in this chapter is a distinctly anti-realist view of what makes a property essential to an object. I accept that some properties are essential to an object and some not, but this commits me neither to realism about de re necessity nor to real essences. My account should be particularly welcome by philosophers who have worries about how our practices of attributing essentiality to properties of objects—in philosophical thought experiments as well as in everyday discourse—can be justified. For on the account I offer, the source of essentiality is not in a world independent of us, but rather in our own conceptual practices.

To give an account of essentiality I make use of the strategy developed in the first chapter of this dissertation. There I discuss how one can use the currently popular idea of response-dependence to argue that some property of an object is conferred by responses or attitudes of

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39 In this way, I wish to vindicate essentialism. My motivations are not unlike Martha Nussbaum's in her "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism", Political Theory, Vol. 20, No. 2 (May, 1992) although the projects are in other ways quite different.


41 Philosophers use the word "realist" to mean many different things. I want to underscore that the real/anti-real distinction that I am working with is to capture the distinction between being independent and dependent upon human thought or practices.

42 I discuss some epistemological advantages of my account over realist essentialist accounts in ch. 3 of this dissertation.

43 The standard works are Mark Johnston's "Objectivity Refigured: Pragmatism without Verificationism" in Reality, Representation, and Projection, ed. by John Haldane and Crispin Wright (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993); Philip Pettit's "Realism and Response-Dependence", in Mind, October, 1991; and Crispin Wright's Truth and Objectivity
subjects. The argument begins with an account of the response-dependence of a concept and then sketches how to get from the response-dependence of a concept to the conferral of the property the concept is of. This provides a general strategy for arguing that a certain property is conferred by attitudes of subjects, a strategy that I hope many philosophers with anti-realist sentiments may find interesting and useful, whether they are developing an anti-realist account of sensory properties or logical ones, moral or aesthetic.

Those uses notwithstanding, I use the strategy as the cornerstone in a constructivist account of the individuation of objects. My dissertation as a whole explores the idea that ordinary objects, including tables and chairs, are in some way constructed by our thought or conceptual practices. Very roughly, if objects are individuated by their essential properties, and if essentiality is conferred, then an object's being the thing it is depends in some way on us. The goal of the present chapter is to argue that essentiality is conferred by ideal representatives of us concept users under ideal conditions. What exactly this amounts to will become clearer as we proceed.

The rest of this chapter has the following structure. First I discuss what it is for a property to be conferred. Next I summarize the strategy I developed in the first chapter of the dissertation. I then apply it to the case of the concept of essentiality. Finally I discuss some objections to my argument and offer some concluding thoughts. Let us start with what it is for a property to be conferred.

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992). By now there is a whole body of literature on response-dependence and its relation to various topics in metaethics, aesthetics, philosophy of mind and language, epistemology and metaphysics.
CONFERRED PROPERTIES

I call a property of an object 'conferred' if it is in virtue of some attitudes of subjects that the object has the property. We can say in that case that the attitudes of the subjects confer the property on the object. Conferred properties abound, but they are not all created equal: They differ in who does the conferring, under what circumstances, and what attitudes are at work. Let's consider a couple of conferred properties:

Consider a baseball game. The Red Sox are playing the Yankees at Fenway Park. Manny Ramirez is batting. One strike. Two strikes. Three. He is out. The fans boo. "That wasn't a strike, that wasn't even close!" a fan exclaims. Later the fan is sitting at home, watching the eleven o'clock news and sees that pitch one more time up close. "That wasn't a strike" the fan mumbles to himself. But it doesn't matter. Everyone may agree that the umpire shouldn't have called a strike. But he did. He judged that the pitch was a strike and that is the end of story. In the game of baseball, the umpire's judgment is final.

What the umpire in my story did was to confer the property of being a strike on the pitch in question. In my story, the property of being a strike is a conferred property. It is the umpire's judgment that confers that property on the pitch and as a result of that judgment a new fact is created. This is the new baseball fact that the pitch was a strike. This is so, even though the umpire may have been attempting to track another fact, a physical fact about the placement of the ball. We can think of two connected but distinct facts:

- baseball fact: the fact that the pitch was a strike
- physical fact: the fact that the ball traveled through the strike zone
The umpire may have been attempting to track the physical fact and been guided by his judgments as to what that was. However, his judgment as to what the physical fact is constitutes the new fact, the baseball fact. It is his judgment about the physical qualities of the ball that confer the baseball property of being a strike on the pitch.

Other conferred properties seem not to have as close a relationship to physical properties. Consider a ballet dancer's solo. Plausibly, its being beautiful does not merely consist in being performed in accordance with technical specification. And, also plausibly, the solo's being beautiful isn't something independent of our thoughts, practices, and sentiments. We may not want to be so crude as to say that the audience's reaction confers the property of being beautiful on the solo but perhaps we want to follow Hume and say that a solo is beautiful in virtue of being pleasing to the appropriate judges, the experts on the matter. On a Humean view, we could say, the attitude of the experts confers the property of being beautiful on the solo.

Now, one can have a conferral account of a property such that it is a particular person, say an actual umpire or expert, who confers the property on the object in question. Or one can have a conferral account, where no actual individuals or committees confer the property, but rather some ideal subjects. Such an account incorporates constructivist elements, since non-actual idealized individuals confer the property on the object. Constructive elements can also occur elsewhere, such as when the conditions under which the response or judgment is to take place are

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14 The relationship between the conferred property of being a strike and the physical property of having traveled trajectory T is that the umpire confers the property of being a strike on a pitch iff he judges that the ball has traveled trajectory T.

15 What if the audience was a bunch of unusually aesthetically challenged individuals who insisted on playing video games throughout the whole performance, yelling out periodically how many Martians they had killed?

not actual conditions, but rather involve some element of idealization. A conferral account of a property is thus constructivist in my sense, if what does the conferring are attitudes of non-actual individuals under non-actual conditions, where a characterization of those non-actual individuals and non-actual conditions is reached by idealizing actual individuals and conditions in some way. Most, if not all, conventionalist accounts are conferral accounts that are not constructivist in my sense.⁴⁷

Some properties are obviously conferred. Other properties may at first appear not conferred, but on closer inspection reveal themselves to be open to such an analysis. My contention here is that the property of being an essential property of an object—essentiality—is open to such an analysis. The key claim is that being an essential property of an object is conferred by our best opinion, understood as the opinion of ideal representatives of us concept users made under ideal conditions. This conferral account of essentiality thus involves constructivist elements both in the characterization of the subjects and of the conditions under which their opinion is to be elicited and in that way is a constructivist conferral account of essentiality.

The thesis that essentiality is conferred by our best opinion should not be confused with another similar-sounding thesis, according to which best opinion confers the essence itself, i. e. those properties that are essential, onto an object.⁴⁸ To see the distinction, consider two claims:

1. Aristotle is human.
2. Aristotle is human essentially.

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⁴⁷ Philosophers use the word “constructivist” in many ways. What I have in mind here is that what does the conferring is a construction. In my case what does the conferring is constructed by idealizing us concept users along an epistemic dimension. This will become clearer shortly.

⁴⁸ In my subsequent discussion I will talk of essentiality and the concept of essentiality, instead of the property of being an essential property of object x and the concept of the property of being an essential property of object x. Essentiality is really a relation holding between a property and an object, but for simplicity of exposition I will ignore that and use 'property' in the non-technical sense to cover both properties and relations.
Whether or not the property of being human is conferred on Aristotle is not my concern here. We can allow that it isn't. Instead, my concern is whether being essential to Aristotle is conferred on the property of being human. On my view, it is. Now on to the argument for my thesis.

THE ARGUMENT FROM RESPONSE-DEPENDENCE

1. Background

The argument from response-dependence begins with the idea that the concept of the property we are interested in is response-dependent. I have argued in an earlier chapter that if a certain concept is response-dependent, then the property it is of is conferred, provided a modest conceptualism about the property is assumed. Let me explain what this involves.

We need to clarify the notion of concept first. A concept of a property—concept, for short—, as I will be using the notion, is a social sharable entity characterized as a set of beliefs about a property. The concept is individuated by the non-negotiable beliefs about the property, the beliefs that are such that one would not know what one was speaking or thinking about using the concept on the hypothesis that the belief were false. This translates into a fairly coarse-grained notion of concept. For instance, if the concept of being a trilateral triangle and the concept of being a triangular triangle have the same non-negotiable beliefs associated with them, which is plausibly the case, then they are the same concept, on this account. Concept commitments are the commitments expressed by the non-negotiable beliefs that are assumed, consciously or tacitly, in the use of the concept in question. The set of these non-negotiable beliefs is what individuates a concept: if

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49 This is why mine is a conferral account of essentiality and not of essence.
50 There are other conceptions of response-dependence where this does not follow. See ch. 1 for a brief discussion of those.
51 I am solely concerned with concepts of properties here, not concepts of objects.
concepts F and G share the same set of non-negotiable beliefs, then they are the same concept. What is an example of a non-negotiable belief? Consider, e. g., married bachelors and colorless red things. Would we know what talk of bachelors amounted to on the hypothesis that it were false that a bachelor is unmarried? Would we know what talk of being red or of red things amounted to on the hypothesis that red things aren't colored?

The notion of non-negotiableness is neither to be equated with apriority nor with metaphysical necessity. A belief is non-negotiable with respect to a certain concept if it underwrites the practice of using the concept. Something can be knowable a priori without being non-negotiable. Likewise, the notion of non-negotiableness is not to capture some deep metaphysical necessity: a belief can be non-negotiable with respect to a certain concept but over time cease to be non-negotiable with respect to any of our concepts as we give up our concepts and acquire new ones.5

As I said earlier, the non-negotiable beliefs associated with a concept express what one is committed to as being the case in using the concept. I call these 'concept commitments'. Concept commitments, then, are the conditions each concept user is committed to as determining the standard of correct usage of the concept.53 The concept commitments of the concept red, for instance, are the conditions each concept user is committed to as being the conditions that each

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5 Perhaps the thing to say about that case is that the belief is still a non-negotiable belief associated with the same concept, but we have just given up using that concept. All this is to say that non-negotiableness is not supposed to capture any deep metaphysical necessity, standing the test of time in being relevant or useful. Non-negotiableness is not set in metaphysical stone.

53 I choose to focus on what I call 'concept commitments' as opposed to the more familiar application conditions for two reasons. First, application conditions are regularly taken to be the criteria each concept user consciously appeals to when applying a concept. It is an important aspect of the characterization of concepts as I am thinking of them that these commitments need not be conscious. Secondly, application conditions are sometimes understood to be something equivalent to truth conditions. I want to make clear that a concept, as I am understanding it here, is not individuated by the conditions under which the property the concept is about applies to an object, but rather by the conditions under which the property is taken to apply to an object by us the concept users. Switching the focus to talking about commitments should help make that clear.
candidate for being red must meet if an application of the concept red to that object is to be correct. They are the standard for correct usage. On my account, a concept user need not be consciously aware of her commitments to a certain standard of correct usage. Rather, they can be her tacit or latent commitments, which she only owns up to given sufficient prodding, much like a patient owns up to his desires on the psychoanalyst's couch.

Now we get to the conceptualist part. This involves the claim that the non-negotiable beliefs cannot fail to be true of the property in question; there is no epistemic access to the property that is not through the non-negotiable beliefs. The properties fit the non-negotiable beliefs, so to speak. The slogan for this modest conceptualism could go: *Properties are shadows of concepts.*

I want to stress that one need not subscribe to conceptualism about all properties to make use of this strategy for arguing for a conferral account of a property. One may be conceptualist about certain properties and not others. For instance one might be willing to be conceptualist about essentiality, but not, perhaps, about properties such as being a horse or being a tiger. Many philosophers are willing to be conceptualist about essentiality and other modal properties, whether or not they subscribe to conceptualism about properties in general. Most philosophers, I suspect, do not subscribe to conceptualism about all properties. However, if one is willing to subscribe to modest conceptualism about essentiality then, if the concept of essentiality is response-dependent, then essentiality is conferred.

What is it then for a concept to be response-dependent? As understood here, in offering a

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54 For more discussion of this, see ch. 1.
55 For instance, one might make a distinction between natural and non-natural properties and be conceptualist about the latter only, where essentiality is thought of as non-natural. However, to make use of the strategy I am advocating for arguing for conferralism about essentiality the basis for the natural/non-natural distinction would have to be independent of the response-dependence status of the concepts of the properties in question.
response-dependence account of a concept the aim is really to reveal our hidden commitments in using the concept in question and show them to be the same as those of a concept that carries its response-dependence status on its sleeve.

Now, which concepts carry their response-dependence status on their sleeve? Concepts, as so understood, are social entities, characterized by the core of a set of beliefs about whatever it is that the concept is about. A concept that wears its response-dependence nature on its sleeve is a concept that explicitly is of a property of being responded to in manner R by subjects S under conditions C, for some R, S, and C. For instance, the concept of being favored by the Queen when traveling is such a concept, as is the concept of being liked by the in-group at the prom at my high school.

To show that a concept is response-dependent one thus has to show that the concept has the same concept commitments as a concept that clearly is response-dependent, a concept that carries its response-dependence on its sleeve. This amounts to showing that they are the same concept and hence, that since one is response-dependent, the other is so, too.

But how do we test our concept commitments and show them to be the same? The idea is this: The two concepts have the same concept commitments if we would not know what talk and thought using the concept amounted to on the hypothesis that something had the property that

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56 This understanding of what a concept is differs considerably from a Fregean notion of 'concept' or any other notion where a concept is more like a property or attribute an object can have. Given how I am understanding what a concept is, one may legitimately ask what is involved when a concept is applied to an object, for that is quite distinct from attributing a property to an object. My answer is that when one applies a concept to an object one is focusing all the associations and beliefs one has about a property on the object in question, judging in effect that those beliefs pertain to that object.

57 The use of the word 'response' is unfortunate here, for it suggests that there is something out there to be responded to. It would be better to use a more neutral word, such as 'attitude', which does not have that connotation. This is the standard characterization in the literature, however, so I will stick with it.
one of the concepts is about without having the property that the other concept is about. For instance, the concepts of being pious and of being loved by the gods have the same concept commitments if we would not know what talk using the concepts amounted to on the hypothesis that something was pious, yet not loved by the gods. In other words, the concepts F and G have the same concept commitments iff the biconditional \( x \text{ is } P_F \text{ iff } x \text{ is } P_G \) is non-negotiable, where \( P_F \) and \( P_G \) are the properties F and G are concepts of, respectively.

Now, if two concepts correctly apply in all an only the same circumstances, isn't that a reason to regard them as the same concept? This is precisely what the conception of response-dependence we are making use of here calls for. If the biconditional is non-negotiable then the two concepts have the same concept commitments, so the story goes. I will discuss potential objections to that thesis shortly. Now, my primary aim is simply to lay out the dialectic of the argument. The structure is thus:

1. The biconditional \( \langle x \text{ is } P_F \text{ iff } x \text{ induces response } R \text{ in subjects } S \text{ under conditions } C \rangle \) is a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept F
2. If the biconditional is a non-negotiable belief associated with concept F, then the concept commitments of the concept of being \( P_F \) and of the concept of inducing response \( R \) in subjects \( S \) under conditions \( C \) are the same
3. If the concept commitments are the same, they are the same concept
4. The concept of inducing response \( R \) in subjects \( S \) under conditions \( C \) is response-dependent
5. So, the concept \( F \) is response-dependent

Provided the argument above is valid, the main work for the response-dependence theorist is to be done by giving support for the idea that a particular biconditional is non-negotiable. For instance, to argue that the concept of being pious is response-dependent one would have to give support for the claim that we would not know what talk of being pious amounted to on the hypothesis that an associated biconditional such as
x is pious iff x is loved by the gods

were false.

2. The status of the response-dependence account

What kind of account is a response-dependence account of a concept? One might think that it would have to be one of two types of account: a descriptive account of our actual concept commitments or a prescriptive account, urging us to adopt new concepts with new commitments. The difference between these two kinds of account corresponds to the Strawsonian distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics, where the former is seen to involve the analysis of our actual concepts, beliefs, and commitments, but the latter as involving an offer to adopt different concepts, different beliefs, different commitments. Where Strawson sided with those who thought metaphysicians should contend themselves with descriptive metaphysics, the revolutionary spirit of revisionary metaphysics might appeal to many conferralists, especially if they see themselves as engaging in a debunking project of one sort or another. Unlike the descriptivist, the revisionary need not argue that the relevant biconditional actually is non-negotiable; the proposal would precisely be that we ought to revise our concepts such that some such biconditional is non-negotiable.

However, a seemingly grave difficulty faces me and my conferralist teammates if we were to offer a purely revisionary account: If one offers an account of the concept of essentiality such that it is a non-negotiable belief about essentiality that it be dependent upon human opinion, while

\footnote{Mark Johnston is one response-dependence theorist who draws this distinction between kinds of response-dependence accounts. See op cit.}

\footnote{See the Introduction to Peter Strawson's \textit{Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics} (London: Methuen, 1959), pp. 9 ff.}
acknowledging that our ordinary concept of essentiality does not involve such a non-negotiable belief isn't one suggesting that we should adopt a new concept? And if that is the case, which it certainly seems to be, how are we to account for the relationship between what is thought about using the old concept on the one hand and the new one on the other? Can we avoid saying that what is thought about using the new concept is different from what is thought about using the old ones? But are we then offering a conferralist account of essentiality as we know it after all? And when we then offer a conferralist, constructivist account of the individuation of objects, are we still talking about our ordinary objects, our tables, our chairs? Haven't we simply changed the subject?

I do think that by offering a revisionary account of the concept of essentiality we are in the danger of changing the subject. For this reason, the aim cannot merely be to urge us to adopt new concepts; it has to be to give an account of our current concepts and our current commitments.

To give a response-dependence account of a concept is thus, as I see it, to engage in a modern-day conceptual analysis. It has two advantages over the kind of conceptual analysis that was central to analytic philosophy in the middle of the twentieth century. The first is that the aim of the analysis is to reveal tacit or implicit conceptual commitments. For that reason, the epistemic worries associated with "the paradox of analysis" do not arise. The second advantage over the traditional conceptual analysis is a strict adherence to a conceptual distinction between concept and property: if we offer a conceptual analysis it is an analysis of a concept; if we want to draw conclusions about the property the concept is of, we need to reveal the assumptions needed to

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60 The paradox of analysis is: How can an analysis of a concept be informative for someone who already has that concept? But there is no paradox if our understanding or knowledge of our concepts is tacit or implicit.
draw such conclusions. By going through our concept of a property when arguing that the property is conferred we are explicit in our view that our epistemic key to the property is through our concept of it. For second-level properties such as essentiality it is hard to see what other method we could even have.

3. The response-dependence of the concept of essentiality: finding the right biconditional

To develop a response-dependence account of a particular concept one has to articulate an appropriate biconditional and show that it is a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept.

What is an appropriate biconditional? That depends on what view one has of what it is that confers the property on the object. In Euthyphro’s case, he thinks that it is the love of the Greek gods that confers the property of being pious on an action. In the case of essentiality, it is a little more complicated. First of all, the idea is that the property to be conferred—being essential to some specific object x—is a second-order property: it is a property a property has just in case it is essential to the object x. Our biconditional thus has to take a slightly different form:

\[
\text{being } P \text{ is essential to } x \iff x \text{'s being } P \text{ induces response } R \text{ in subjects } S \text{ under conditions } C.
\]

There are many ways of attempting to flesh out the above. The particular suggestion that I have relies on the notions of conceivability and inconceivability, in the sense that I will explain. Here is a first step in that direction:

\[
\text{being } P \text{ is essential to } x \iff x \text{ is } P \text{ and } x \text{'s being } P \text{ induces the response in subjects } S \text{ under conditions } C \text{ that it is inconceivable that } x \text{ not be } P.
\]

This is a first attempt to tie together the notion of essentiality and the notions of conceivability
and inconceivability. But who are the subjects whose response counts? It may not be good to rely on the responses of us normal human subjects. We may not give due consideration to the issue, may be inattentive, forgetful or not very knowledgeable—to say nothing of rational deliberation. The subjects whose conceptual powers count should be maximally well informed, attentive and rational. In short we want to idealize us ordinary human concept users along an epistemic dimension such that the result is a subject who is maximally faithful to our actual concept commitments. Moreover, we need to build idealization into the conditions under which opinion is reached. These are the conditions of maximal information about possible cases where a concept might be used, as well as freedom from any obstruction of the process of deliberation. We can think of our ideal representatives as having gone through all possible thought experiments to test our use of a concept. It is their opinion under those “end of the day” conditions that count.

The next question is how we are to understand the notion of conceivability for the purposes of forming the biconditional. Is it to be a quasi-sensory ability, such as is articulated by Hart where A's being P is conceivable just in case it can be perceived by the imagination, as it were? Or perhaps it is to be a more “externalist” notion such as Wiggins's where A's being P is conceivable just in case it is consistent with the concept of A that it be P and where ‘concept’ is understood in a roughly Fregean sense? The notion I have in mind is closer to Hart's: A's being P

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61 Here I draw on the work of Peter Menzies. He has offered a response-dependence account of the concept of possibility in terms of the concept of conceivability in “Possibility and Conceivability: A Response-Dependent Account of Their Connections” (in European Review of Philosophy: Response-Dependence, volume 3, edited by Roberto Casati and Christine Tappolet, 1998) and although I cannot make use of his account as it stands, it has both provided illumination and inspiration and in articulating the notion of ideal conditions I draw directly on his work. Menzies draws on Pettit's account of responses-dependence, which I take to be a semantic account and not be easily coupled with some other assumptions to yield metaphysical results. Pettit himself seems to share that view. For a brief discussion of this see ch.1.

is conceivable to S if S, when representing to herself in imagination, sees no apparent
ccontradiction in supposing that A is P. This is a suitably “internalist” notion of conceivability in
that the conceiver is to have immediate epistemic access to whether there is an apparent
ccontradiction in supposing that A be P. It is quasi-sensory in a very modest sense: no more so
than seeing a logical contradiction is quasi-sensory, when one represents to oneself in imagination
P and not-P. In favoring this notion of conceivability for the purposes of formulating the
bic平conditional, I do not intend to take a stand on whether that is the “right” notion of
conceivability more generally.

Let's try to sharpen this internalist notion of conceivability somewhat. What is it for a subject to
“see” or “not see” a contradiction in supposing that A is P? Is it enough that the contradiction
stare the subject in the face? Or need the subject become aware of it? To take an unhappily
familiar example, consider the beginning logic student who persists in thinking that P&~P. I want
to say about the student that the contradiction stares him in the face, but he does not see it.
P&~P is conceivable to him at that time; he represents P and not-P to himself in imagination, but
sees no contradiction. The subject needs to be aware or conscious of the contradiction to “see” it.
This holds for our ideal epistemic agents as well: they need to be aware of a contradiction to see a
contradiction.

The subjects whose conceptual powers count are thus to be ideal representatives of us concept
users with our current conceptual commitments. They are to have engaged in countless thought
experiments to test our use of concepts. Their finding it inconceivable that x not be P thus comes
down to their seeing a contradiction in supposing to themselves that x not be P. If we ask the
further question what the source of the contradiction is to be the answer is simple: It contradicts
our conceptual practices to suppose that x not be P.\textsuperscript{63}

Thus we have arrived at our candidate biconditional, where idealization is built in, both in the specification of conditions and of subjects:

being P is essential to x iff x is P and it would be inconceivable to ideal representatives of us concept users under ideal conditions that x not be P.\textsuperscript{64}

\section*{4. The argument from response-dependence for a constructivist, conferral account of essentiality}

Having articulated an appropriate biconditional, we are now in a position to sketch the argument from response-dependence for a constructivist conferral account of essentiality:

1. The biconditional <being P is essential to x iff x is P and it would be inconceivable to ideal representatives of us concept users under ideal conditions that x not be P> is a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept of being an essential property of object x
2. If the biconditional is a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept of being an essential property of object x, then the two concepts have the same concept commitments
3. If the concept commitments are the same, the concepts are one and the same concept
4. The concept of being responded to as inconceivable is a response-dependent concept
5. The concept of being an essential property of an object is a response-dependent concept
6. If a concept is response-dependent and conceptualism about the property it is about is true, then the property the concept is about is conferred.
7. Conceptualism about being an essential property of an object is true
8. Being an essential property of an object is a conferred property

The conferral account of essentiality that emerges now is a particular kind of conferral account. It is an implicit or explicit commitment of each user of the concept of essentiality that our best opinion determines the matter, but does not merely detect an independent fact. In other words, there is a commitment to the view that our best opinion, arrived at after a process of correction and renegotiation, determines whether a property is essential to an object or not, rather than

\textsuperscript{63} More about this in chapter 3 of this dissertation.
\textsuperscript{64} Note that whether x is P is not at issue. It is given that x is P and the question is whether it is so essentially. Hence, we add that x is P into the biconditional on the right hand side.
detect that fact.

An analogy with Rawls's account of justice can help to draw a sharper distinction. On Rawls's account, the principles of justice are arrived at in the original position behind the veil of ignorance through a construction procedure. The role of the procedure is not to detect principles that are already there, waiting to be found, so to speak. Rather, the principles of justice are the result of that procedure, whatever that result may be. Rawls had, of course, firm views about what the result of the constructive procedures would be—his two principles of justice—but that need not concern us here. What concerns us here is that he offers a procedural account, as opposed to a substantive account, of the principles of justice. This is in stark contrast to views according to which any kind of decision procedure plays merely an epistemic function, aiding us in getting clearer about what the principles of justice may be, but where their content is determined independently of us and our procedures.

The account that I offer is thus a constructivist conferral account of essentiality. It is a conferral account in that it is our best opinion, arrived at after a corrective procedure, which confers the property of being an essential on a property of an object. It is constructivist in that it is our best opinion under substantially specified ideal conditions that determines the matter: it is a hypothetical representation of us with our current commitments and values that determines the matter.

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66 I am here explicitly interpreting Rawls' constructivism in Theory of Justice as a metaphysical position. In later works Rawls does not want to subscribe to metaphysical constructivism, but merely a political constructivism, lest his view itself incorporate a comprehensive view of the good. I take this to be a change in his view, rather than a clarification. In any case, the analogy with a metaphysical interpretation of Rawlsian constructivism should be clear. I should also note that the veil of ignorance also plays an epistemic function in Rawls's work, such as to help the reader, but we can ignore that function now.
I gave an argument for the claim that if the concept is response-dependent then the property it is of is conferred in Chapter One, so I will put that step aside. I will thus only discuss objections to the argument for the claim that the concept of essentiality is response-dependent. Critics are likely to object to one of three steps in the argument: a) they might object to the claim that the biconditional is non-negotiable; b) they might object that the fact that the biconditional is non-negotiable does not show that the two concepts have the same concept commitments; and c) they might object that although the two concepts have the same concept commitments, they are not the same concept. Let us discuss the objections and possible replies.

5. The objection to the claim that the biconditional is non-negotiable

The first critic takes issue with the starting point of the argument. This critic argues that the biconditional

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\text{being } P \text{ is essential to } x \text{ iff } x \text{ is } P \text{ and it would be inconceivable to ideal representatives of us concept users under ideal conditions that } x \text{ not be } P
\]

is not a non-negotiable belief associated with the concept of being an essential property of an object x.

To see the potential force of the objection, we must keep in mind what kind of claim it is to say that the biconditional is non-negotiable. It is a claim to the effect that our current concept of essentiality is such that we would not know what our use of it amounted to on the supposition that the biconditional were false. I claim that this is the case; the critic denies it. How are we to decide? In these first two chapters of my dissertation I am offering a way to not only claim that essentiality is conferred, but also to argue for it. However, it now seems that the argument rests
on a crucial claim to the effect that the biconditional is non-negotiable, a claim that the critic seems quite easily able to deny. What this brings out is that the argument that I offer for the conferral account of essentiality is not a knock-down argument. I offer a view, a way to account for essentiality, and give support for that view. A key piece in that account is the claim that the biconditional is non-negotiable. What I say, in fact is this: I take the biconditional to be non-negotiable and I invite you to do the same. Although it is open to you to reject that invitation, I think that what you have to be committed to instead is not attractive. What is it that you have to be committed to and why isn't it attractive?

This critic who maintains that the biconditional is not non-negotiable has to claim that we would perfectly well know what we were talking and thinking about on the hypothesis that the biconditional were false and being P was essential to x but x's being P wasn't inconceivable to ideal versions of us under ideal conditions.

What would we be talking and thinking about, according to this critic? Note, that it is not open to the critic to tinker with our use of the word 'conceivable'. It is to be understood in the way we have outlined as a matter of perceived coherence. Conceivability under ideal conditions, by ideal agents, is of course the notion we are working with. Nonetheless, the critic is bound to take issue with our claim that the property of being an essential property of an object and the property of its being inconceivable to ideal epistemic agents under ideal conditions that the object not have the property couldn't come apart. And the motivation for that is the strong conviction that the property of being essential to an object is independent of our epistemic powers, however idealized, whereas the property of being inconceivable to ideal epistemic agents under ideal conditions is not.
It is, of course, this strong conviction that I take issue with. What more could the realist want from essentiality than that ideal versions of us would find it inconceivable that the object lacked the property? What he wants, of course, is precisely its independence of our conceptual powers. Hence, my critic posits real essentiality. Normally I am no foe of things queer, but the reasons and support for real essentiality are mysterious indeed. My worries echo traditional empiricist worries regarding real necessity and the mysteriousness of our relation to such a phenomenon, both epistemic and semantic relation. My gripe with this critic is not that real essentiality makes no sense, that it is somehow incoherent, but rather that it is mysterious to me how we have access to these mind-independent phenomena.

The mystery is what access, semantic and epistemic, we have to real essentiality. What evidence do we have that there is such a property, independent of our thought and practices? Have we ever seen any? Come into causal contact with them? No, we haven't. Plausibly, we regularly come into causal contact with various physical properties, but the property of being essential is not one of them. Perhaps our epistemic access to essentiality is not through our senses, but through our faculty of intuition. We regularly engage in thought experiments to consult our intuitions about essentiality. Perhaps our intuition is a special faculty that gives us direct access to essentiality. But, what grounds would we have for such a theory? The rails from our faculty of intuition—not a particularly unmysterious faculty—to real essentiality, residing in the unconceptualized world are mysterious indeed. That need not matter. Even most contemporary philosophers with empiricist sympathies don't require some causal or quasi-sensory contact with

68 This would require something analogous to Putnam's "noetic rays", mysterious rails linking our words or thoughts to objects in a world independent of us. See Hilary Putnam's Reason, Truth and History (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge, University Press, 1981), p. 51.
properties. Of course, we need some reason to believe in such phenomena, but they need not be reasons that fit cleanly into the epistemology of eighteenth century empiricism. It is enough that they be required by our best theory. But that isn't the case here. Other plausible theories are available, where real essentiality need not be assumed.

Thus, there are two options available to us. If we want to reject the claim that the biconditional is non-negotiable, then we must accept real essentiality. I have given reasons to think that doing so is not a happy solution. If the reader agrees with me, he should also be happy to agree with me that the biconditional is non-negotiable.

6. From non-negotiability to sameness of concept commitments

The next critic does not object to the claim that the biconditional is non-negotiable. She agrees with me that it is. She disagrees, however, with the claim that that shows that the two concepts have the same concept commitments. For example, she might argue, the following biconditional is non-negotiable, yet the two concepts involved don't have the same concept commitments:

\[ x \text{ is a trilateral closed geometric figure iff } x \text{ is a triangular closed geometric figure} \]

To see what is at issue, let us revisit the idea of concept commitments. The conception of response-dependence that I have been drawing upon, that of Mark Johnston, is not concerned with concept commitments, but with application conditions. According to Johnston, if the biconditional is non-negotiable, then the two concepts involved share the same \textit{a priori} conditions of application and that, in turn, shows them to be the same concept. On the Johnstonian account, it seems, application conditions are what each concept user is consciously committed to
in applying the concept. I argued in an earlier chapter, that this understanding of application conditions was unfortunate, both in general, and in particular for the response-dependent theorist. I advocated a different understanding of the commitments involved, where they could be latent or tacit. To avoid misunderstanding and confusion I suggested that we switch from talking about *application conditions* to talking about *concept commitments*. Concept commitments are the set of non-negotiable beliefs each concept user, consciously or tacitly, is committed to as holding if an application of the concept to an object is to be correct. The difference really lies in the difference between the norms that guide the use of a concept and the perhaps latent set of beliefs presupposed in their use.

We can now see that if the biconditional is non-negotiable, then the concept commitments are the same, but the application conditions need not be the same. It need not be the same norms that the concept user consults when deciding whether the concept of being a trilateral closed geometric figure applies as the norms he consults when applying the concept of being a triangular closed geometric figure, but a user of the concept of being a trilateral closed geometric figure is committed to whatever set of non-negotiable beliefs are assumed in the use of the concept. This set is the same as the set of non-negotiable beliefs governing the use of the concept of being a triangular closed geometric figure because having one property logically follows from having the other.

7. From sameness of concept commitments to sameness of concept

The third kind of critic does not take issue with either of the first two steps. This critic claims that

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two concepts can have the same concept commitments, as so understood, without being the same concept. This kind of critic wants concepts to be more finely grained epistemically such that the concept of being a trilateral closed geometric figure and the concept of being a triangular closed geometric figure come out as two distinct concepts.

“Why?”, we might ask. What is the motivation for treating them as two distinct concepts? One motivation is to account for the epistemic difference that can occur at the beginning of an enquiry between the two concepts. After all, it takes geometric proof to show that if something is a trilateral closed geometric figure it is also a triangular closed geometric figure, and vice versa. Concepts, as I understand them here, however, are not designed to capture that difference. They are designed to capture what we are fundamentally committed to in our application of it. The critic has no reason to feel cheated here. Her notion of concept has good and legitimate use; it is just not the use the notion of concept is put to here. These two notions of concept do different work for us and can coexist quite harmoniously.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I have offered a particular kind of argument for my constructivist account of essentiality which I call an argument from response-dependence. I made use of an argumentative strategy, laid out in an earlier chapter, that is helpful for arguing that a certain property is conferred if one is willing to subscribe to modest conceptualism about that property and make certain assumptions about concepts and how they are individuated. I applied that argumentative strategy to the case of the concept of essentiality, understood as the concept of being an essential property of an object x. What resulted was an account of essentiality that traces the source of that
In the next chapter I will offer a different argument for my account of essentiality, an argument that I call *an argument from practice*. This argument will bring out some of the epistemic virtues my account has over realist accounts of essentiality.
Grounding Our Practices

Thought experiments about essences vindicated

INTRODUCTION

In last chapter I made use of an argumentative strategy developed in the first chapter of this dissertation to offer what I called an argument from response-dependence for my constructive conferralist account of essentiality. In this chapter I approach my account of essentiality from a different angle and offer it support by starting with our practices of gaining knowledge of the essences of things through thought experiments and showing how my account of essentiality vindicates those practices. This ability to vindicate our practices is a major advantage that my account has over realist accounts of essentiality. Then, having shown how my account vindicates our practices I turn to the question whether this vindication has been bought too dearly and address what I take to be the most serious worries one might have about my account.

THE DOMINANT PICTURE SINCE KRIPKE

Ever since Kripke's lectures, Naming and Necessity,70 were published, the traditional realist view about essences has gained new and numerous friends. This view involves two claims: 1) that some of an object's properties are essential to it and those properties play a central role in the individuation of that object; and 2) that the source of that essentiality lies in the nature of things, as it is independent of human thought and practices. Realists about essence claim famous ancestors in Leibniz and other rationalists, medieval scholastics, and of course, Aristotle.

70 Saul Kripke, Naming and Necessity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).
The sociology of philosophy is at times rather strange. For no more than two decades before Kripke's lectures the idea of real essences was prone to draw scorn and ridicule, when it was thought that the epistemological difficulties facing such a view were too much to handle. Although the scorn and ridicule were not justified, the truth is that the epistemological difficulties with realist essentialism are still there.

The difficulties are this: Essentiality resides in the nature of things as they are independent of us, yet we don't seem able to gain knowledge of it through empirical investigation like other properties in nature. We can, for example, discover that Arnold Schwarzenegger is a human and not a machine, perhaps despite first appearances, but how are we to discover that his being human is essential to him? Prima facie, there is an epistemic gap between us knowledge gatherers and the essences of things and the challenge for the realist is to show that this gap can be bridged, or, alternatively, show that the existence of the gap is in fact illusory.

The starting point for this chapter is not the general epistemic difficulties alluded to above, but a particular method for gaining knowledge of the essences of things prevalent in philosophy as well as in everyday life. This is the method of engaging in thought experiments of varying complexity, ostensibly to test whether a certain object has a property essentially or not. To cite a familiar example from Kripke's lectures, we ask whether Queen Elizabeth could have been born of different parents from those she actually was. We invite ourselves to imagine such a scenario and based on whether we think we have succeeded in doing so judge that she is essentially born of her actual parents or not. Similarly, we ask whether this very table could have been made of ice; whether this puddle of water could have been made up of $\text{H}_2\text{O}$. We further ask: Is it essential to

\footnote{Op. cit., pp. 110 ff.}
me that I have the very body I have? Could I step into one teletransporter on Earth and walk out of another on Mars, if my body has not traveled with me, only a blueprint of my cerebral makeup has made it through electronically?\textsuperscript{72}

While I am here to vindicate thought experiments as a method for gaining knowledge of the essences of things, I am not here to vindicate all thought-experiential practices of the professional philosopher, not to mention all the conclusions that have been drawn from them. Once I have presented my account of how we should think of thought experiments about essences of things, it should be pretty clear what kinds of preconditions need be met if such a thought experiment is to be carried out successfully. But the idea is that such vindication is possible; in fact, if we accept my story of what makes a property essential to an object the vindication comes very naturally and effortlessly.

Of course, the fact that we engage in certain practices does not conclusively show that a theory that cannot justify those practices easily, or even at all, is wrong. It isn't out of the question that our practices are in error. But here, as in other areas of metaphysics, we do well to follow Aristotle in taking the appearances seriously and search for a theory that can make sense of those appearances. If no such theory can be found, then the theory we favor should ideally explain why the appearances are misleading. The appearances are thus both the starting point of inquiry and provide constraints on our theory. In our case, then, we do well to start with our practices of gaining knowledge of the essences of things through thought experiments and look for a theory that can show those practices to be justified. In the absence of an independent argument to the effect that our practices are unjustified we had better take them seriously. This is precisely what I

do here. I agree with the realist that we should take our practices of engaging in thought experiments about essences seriously. However, whereas the realist faces a *prima facie* challenge of how to vindicate those practices my aim here is to show how my account of essentiality comes with a very natural and plausible story about what we are doing when we engage in thought experiments about the essences of things and how those practices are vindicated.

Let's start with why these practices need vindication at all, which brings us to the realists and the *prima facie* challenge they face when trying to make sense of those practices.

**The Prima Facie Challenge for the Realist**

Let me draw up a common realist picture. Consider Arnold Schwarzenegger and his being human. According to the realist, as the position is understood here, what makes the property of being human essential to Arnold—assuming here that it is, pick some other property if you don't find the example persuasive—is something that is independent of our thought and practices. It lies in the nature of Arnold as he is independently of us. Similarly for Tigo, the Bengal tiger in the Franklin Park Zoo: If Tigo's being a tiger is essential, it is so, according to the realist, independently of our use of language or concepts or anything else to do with us. Understanding *essentiality* as the property of being an essential property of an object x, we can thus say that the realist thinks that essentiality is *real*.

The challenge for the realist has two sources: from the peculiar property that essentiality is, i.e. its modal nature, and from its status as real. Its real nature is not enough. For various other properties are independent of our conceptual or perceptual powers, yet we can gain knowledge of them. For instance, an object's weight and extension is presumably independent of our
conceptual and perceptual powers, yet we can gain knowledge of its weight and extension, by making various measurements and calculations. But how are we to gain access to essentiality on the realist picture? To be sure we can investigate an object, say, a particular tiger, Tigo, and determine that it has certain properties, say, four legs, and black stripes on an orange coat. But how are we to discover that Tigo has these properties essentially (or not)? Our empirical investigations reveal only what is, not what must or might be. Or so it seems. This is the general worry about properties such as essentiality, properties that an object has not merely in virtue of its status or arrangement here and now, but in virtue of its status or arrangement in counterfactual situations. The precise challenge is to explain how we can gain knowledge of those kinds of properties, in particular essentiality, through engaging in thought experiments.

The challenge facing the realist stemming from our practices of gaining knowledge by engaging in thought experiments can now be stated thus: If essentiality, being the peculiar modal property it is, is real, and has nothing to do with us or our conceptual powers, how is exercising those powers in thought experiments or ordinary discourse to be a justified method of gaining knowledge of the essences of things? How is my thought experiment about Arnold Schwarzenegger or Tigo to reveal what they could or could not be? If essentiality were somehow dependent or linked to our conceptual powers, then perhaps we could acknowledge that exercising those powers in thought experiments could give us knowledge. But no such story is available to the realist. For, by hypothesis, their natures are completely independent of our imagination and conceptual powers. Prima facie, then, the realist faces the challenge of explaining how thought experiments about essences are to be vindicated, given the kind of property essentiality is, its status as real, and the peculiar method that thought experiments are.
That such a *prima facie* challenge faces the realist is evident from the recent insurgence of literature on the relationship between conceivability and possibility and the uses of thought experiments in modal epistemology more generally.\(^73\) My aim here is not to rehearse how realists attempt to meet this challenge—that would be a topic for a doctoral dissertation all by itself—but rather to register that they do face it and then show how an anti-realist of my stripe does not. As we shall now see, a conferralist about essentiality can offer a very natural story about thought experiments about essences that shows them to be a legitimate, if fallible, method of gaining knowledge of essences.

**A STORY THAT GROUNDS OUR PRACTICES**

The story that I offer you here locates the source of essentiality in our conceptual practices, as opposed to the nature of things as they are independent of us. It is in virtue of something about us and our conceptual practices that a property is essential to an object. In virtue of what exactly? The key idea is, let us recall, that essentiality is what I call a *conferred* property. Let me rehearse this. The idea is familiar from Plato's *Euthyphro*, where Socrates asks the dialogue's namesake: Is what is pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods? Or, as I would put the question: does the gods' love confer the property of being pious onto the action or do the gods merely detect the property and as a result love the action? Euthyphro's initial position is that the gods' love *confers* the property of being pious on an action, and being pious is thus a *conferred* property, in my sense.

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Now I propose that essentiality is a conferred property of a certain kind. It isn't conferred by the love of the Greek gods, but by ideal representatives of us concept users, when they are maximally aware of our conceptual use. Let me flesh this out.

Consider Arnold again and his being human. The idea is that Arnold's being human is essential just in case ideal representatives of us users of concepts such as that of being human would find it inconceivable that he not be human. Just like it is the gods' love that confers the property of being pious on an action, so it is the ideal representatives' finding it inconceivable that Arnold not be human that confers essentiality onto the property of being human.

On this account of essentiality, the property of being essential to an object is conferred by the ideal representatives of us concept users at the ideal limit of a procedure of correcting for cognitive limitations, so let me say something about the idealization involved. The guiding idea is that the ideal representatives are ideal versions of us, normal users of shared concepts such as that of being human and the like. These are non-actual subjects and their act of conferring essentiality is a hypothetical act. Arnold's being human is essential because ideal version of us would find it inconceivable that Arnold not be human. What I am offering is thus a constructivist account of essentiality in the following sense: essentiality is conferred by a hypothetical act of non-actual subjects. My claim is, though, that they represent our conceptual commitments as embodied in our conceptual practices.

**Vindicating our practices**

Making sense of our practices of acquiring knowledge of the essences of things is not the only virtue of the account of essentiality I offer, but it is an important virtue. It is an account that takes
our practices seriously and seeks to tread a fine balance between two extremes—grounding our practices in real essentiality conceived of as independent of us and our practices and giving up on the idea of grounding our practices altogether—by rethinking the nature of essentiality and its relation to us. This balancing act is similar to attempts by moral or political philosophers who wish to give an account of moral or political value as that which grounds our practices of value attribution. Let us now see how the account of essentiality can ground these practices.

Consider our various questions whether a property is essential to an object. Consider a particular chair, for example. We ask: Is having four legs essential to this chair? We engage in thought experiments. We ask: Would the chair still be the same chair, if it lost one of its legs? Got painted bright red? These are questions about how the object could change and still be the same. We also ask questions about how the object could have been: Could this very table have had three legs? Similarly, we ask how Tigo, the tiger, could have been: Could Tigo have had three legs? Spots instead of stripes? Been a robot controlled remotely from the evil inhabitants of Mars? What are we doing when we engage in these thought experiments? What is the proper subject matter of our experiments? What exactly is being tested?

For the sake of comparison, consider the model of experiment offered to us from elementary physics. When the beginning physics student tests the effects of tinkering with the components of a cart that slides down a designated incline the experiment runs like this: she tinkers with the components, lets the cart loose and records the time it takes the cart to slide down.

Contrast the typical thought experiment. We don’t add a new leg to our table and then wait to

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see what happens to the table—whether it is still the same or whether it has turned into something else, or perhaps gone out of existence. The subject of our experiment, I suggest, isn't the table at all. It is, instead, our own reactions to the suggested change. The point of our exercise is to see what we would say about those circumstances. Would we still find it to be the same old table; would we still recognize Tigo as the same tiger?

It isn't at all controversial to say that what we are testing in thought experiments is our own intuitions. The problem just is that that doesn't say very much. What exactly is it to “consult our intuitions”? Intuitions about what? We cannot fully evaluate whether the method is a good one for gaining knowledge about the subject matter before we get clearer about the nature of the subject matter itself. If we are testing our intuitions about something intuition has access to we don't have a problem on our hands. And that is precisely what I suggest we are doing: We are testing our intuitions about what we are committed to in our use of concepts. We are, as it were, making an educated guess as to what we are committed to in our use of the concepts involved. And what determines whether a property is essential to an object or not is what ideal versions of us deem we are committed to. Hence, when we engage in thought experiments, we make an educated guess about two things: what our concept commitments actually are and then, given those commitments, what the essences of things are.

How exactly does our “educated guessing” work? I am sympathetic to the idea that just as we test a hypothesis regarding the properties of Euclidean geometric figures with the aid of drawings of

77 Aside from testing our own concept commitments, thought experiments can also serve the function of gathering all our knowledge of related matters together and enabling us to make an educated prediction of what the empirical findings may turn out to be, but I won't dwell on that function here.
them with a pencil and paper, so we represent in our mind objects and their properties to test which of those properties are essential to them. A certain kind of realist may even agree with me here. The question just is what is being represented, and on what grounds the representation is an accurate representation of whatever it is a representation of.

There is a very natural story to be told about the Euclidean figures and the grounds for claiming that we are representing them accurately. Consider the case when we are asked to figure out what relationship holds between two geometric figures in Euclidean geometry and then to prove that the relationship holds. Before we get anywhere near a proof we draw up circles and triangles and other figures to aid our minds in discovering what the relationship between the figures may be. The analogy with seeing and other modes of perception is apt here: the aim of our drawings is to help us “see” what the relationship between the figures is. On what grounds can we claim that our representations of the triangles and circles capture the relevant properties of these figures? The answer is simple: the figures are defined to have the properties we represent them as having. We have captured the essential properties of the Euclidean figures because in our representation of them we are guided by the definition of these objects.

Turn now to the thought experiment involving Tigo, the tiger. We ask, for example, whether Tigo could have been three-legged, had dots instead of stripes, been a robot controlled by the evil Martians. What are we guided by in our thought experiment about Tigo? What is our access to the essential properties of Tigo? According to the conferralist story offered here, we represent in our mind what we take ourselves to be committed to. Let's say that we are fairly ignorant of our concept commitments in using the concept of being a tiger and the only things we start with is that Tigo is a tiger. Given that, we ask ourselves if we can imagine scenarios in which Tigo had
three legs or spots instead of stripes or where Tigo was a robot controlled by the evil Martians. In entertaining these scenarios we get clearer about what we are committed to using the concept of being a tiger for. For instance, we come to realize that we don't merely intend to use the concept to capture the property of being an orange four-legger with black stripes, but rather some internal structural property. And we may come to realize that we cannot make sense of Tigo's continued existence as anything else than a tiger; in other words, that we are committed to using the concept of being a tiger in such a way that whatever is a tiger is so throughout its existence and that Tigo is thus essentially a tiger. Having gotten clearer about our own concept commitments, we can rule certain scenarios out as incompatible with our use. Given that Tigo is a tiger, and tigers are tigers throughout their existence, he couldn't be a Martian-controlled robot, for example. Clearly, being a remote-controlled robot is incompatible with being a tiger, but what about having spots instead of stripes? We are supposing that in using the concept of being a tiger we are not attempting to track the property of being an orange four-legger with black stripes but rather some internal structural property, but we don't quite know if that internal structural property, say some genotype G, can express the phenotype of spots rather than the phenotype of stripes under some circumstances. We don't quite know what is entailed by our conceptual use and thus our understanding of our concept commitments should leave us silent on the matter; it is a matter of empirical investigation.

Could Tigo have had only three legs? Sadly, some tigers get born without one leg (is it contamination of their water? chemical pollution?) and some lose their legs in traps that shouldn't exist. We then conclude that it is compatible with our usage of the concept of being a tiger that Tigo have three legs and that Tigo isn't essentially four-legged. What is guiding our educated
guess as to the essence of Tigo is what we take to be our conceptual commitments in using concepts such as that of being a tiger, but envisioning these hypothetical scenarios is a way of testing to see if what we take to be our commitments are our actual commitments. On my view, then, when we engage in these thought experiments, we aren't testing Tigo or the table at all, but our own commitments. The physics student's subject matter is the cart and its travels, ours is our own commitments.

According to my story, thought experiments are legitimate methods of philosophical argument precisely because they are tests of our commitments and what matters to whether a property is essential to an object or not is what we would say at the end of the day, so to speak.

The knowledge we gain about our concept commitments is fallible knowledge, of course, but that is how it should be. It is fallible both because we may not be completely aware of what our use of concepts is tracking and also because we may not know what follows from the fact that in our use we are tracking a certain property and not some other one—what is compatible with our conceptual use and what isn't. Our story here thus makes sense of our actual practices of essentiality ascriptions and gives support for the claim that the thought experiments that we engage in are a justifiable, if fallible, method for gaining knowledge of the essences of things. But is the conferralist account of essentiality too high a price to pay for the vindication of these thought experiments of ours? We now turn to addressing the main worries that might arise about the account.

**Idealization**

The first worry concerns the details of the account. What is at issue here is not the vindication of
said epistemic practices *per se*; the critic can even grant that if his worries are ironed out, my account manages such vindication. He is just concerned about who exactly these *ideal representatives* of us concept users are and their relation to us, what those *conceptual practices* are anyway, and last, but not least, who these *we* are. Let me address these worries in turn, starting with the notion of *we*.

The *we* worry may be a simple request for clarification, an invitation to say a little more about the details of the account, or it may be fueled by a skeptical worry about the possibility that there are any *we*. The notion of *we* that I need is very minimal: it is relative to a particular concept and picks out those subjects who share that concept. The *we* of one concept may overlap with the *we* of another, but need not. The *we* associated with the concept of being human is the set of subjects sharing that concept, no matter how conscious they are of their use. This *we* notion is thus quite unmysterious and should not sustain skeptical worries about its very possibility.

*Conceptual practices* are simply the practices that we concept users engage in and the ideal representatives of us concept users are hypothetical subjects constructed by idealizing actual users of a concept along an epistemic dimension. The ideal representative is an ideal version of you or me, but smarter, less forgetful, better at rational deliberation, and maximally knowledgeable about how we use the concept under consideration. The ideal representative is thus ideally situated to recognize what we are committed to when we use the concept.

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78 Two people share a concept just in case they share the concept commitments. Use of a concept can reach backwards and forwards in time and space or be limited to a particular sociohistorical context, all depending on whether the concept users share the concept commitments or not. Using the same word is obviously not enough.
THE NATURE OF THE HYPOTHETICAL CONFESSION

Even if the above discussion alleviates worries there might be about the idealization involved, there is a residual worry about what the ideal representatives are really up to and the work they do for us. Part of the attraction for my account of essentiality is, after all, supposed to be the demystification of essences and essentiality. Yet, the account involves hypothetical acts by non-actual subjects. Demystification indeed!

That a property is conferred by a hypothetical act is, however, not really that mysterious. We are familiar with such acts in the philosophical canon, for example, from Hume's account of aesthetic properties in *The Standard of Taste*. Let us remind ourselves how it goes on Hume's account. We have the experts on a certain subject matter or genre, say Minoean vases, and whether a certain vase is beautiful depends on the opinion of the experts. Thankfully the experts don't have to travel around endlessly to give their opinion on each vase: a vase is beautiful because the experts would find it pleasing, were they to encounter it.

An account that involves that a property be conferred by a hypothetical act is also next of kin to a counterfactual analysis of a property, such as a dispositional property. Consider, e.g., the account of being brittle where an object is brittle just in case it would break if struck. The object is brittle although, with good luck, it never gets struck.

If the hypothetical act is not what is mysterious, perhaps the problem is the conferral of a property by non-actual subjects. But here I see no problem, either. Consider Hume's experts,

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again. Presumably, the Humean does not want the beauty of a Minoean vase held hostage to whether there are actually any experts around who would find it pleasing. The beauty of the vase does not diminish with the death of the only world specialist on Minoean vases, when no living person is left to appreciate it. It is beautiful, so the story might go, because subjects maximally attentive to its features and relation to things of same and different kinds would find it pleasing. No mystery here, either, as long as we know how to perform the idealization that is to go from us, actual, imperfect subjects, to those non-actual subjects who are to represent us and our conceptual commitments.

Perhaps the worry does not concern the hypothetical conferral of properties by non-actual subject per se, but the use to which I want to put the account. Let me turn to that.

**IS THE HYPOTHETICAL REAL ENOUGH FOR INDIVIDUATION?**

On the account I have offered, essentiality is conferred by a hypothetical act of non-actual subjects. That would seem to mean that no conferral ever takes place. On the other hand, I want my account of essentiality to be a cornerstone in an account of the individuation of objects. But if no conferral of essentiality takes place, does that not mean that objects don't have essential properties, and that on an essentialist account of individuation, such as mine, there is no individuation? The worry isn't so much that the idea of a hypothetical conferral by non-actual subjects doesn't make sense, but rather that an account that relies on it can't do the work that I want it to do.

Given that my account of essentiality is to be a cornerstone in a constructivist account of the individuation of objects let us inquire more deeply into what that requires. An account of the
individuation of objects is an account of what makes an object what it is, what distinguishes it from like and unlike things. As such it is not, in the first instance, an account of how we discriminate it from like and unlike things, i.e., it is not an epistemological account, but rather a metaphysical account. It is also not an account simply of how we single out objects in experience.\textsuperscript{81} In offering an account of the individuation of objects I start half-way up the mountain: I take for granted the assumption that it is an object's essential properties—its essence—that individuates it. Unlike most other essentialists,\textsuperscript{82} however, I offer an anti-realist account of what makes a property essential to an object. However, \textit{what kind} of anti-realist account it is, is important.

Consider the traditional anti-realist account of essentiality, the conventionalist one. A conventionalist about essentiality would presumably say that something about us, or our conventions, \textit{actually} conferred essentiality onto properties of objects. Naturally, the conventionalist would have to spell out what exactly did the conferring, but I won't dwell on that here. What matters here is that on the conventionalist account some actual conventions or subjects confer essentiality onto properties of objects. A conventionalist view can thus be properly regarded as a \textit{conferralist} view. However, it is not a \textit{constructivist} conferralism. A constructivist conferralism is such that a \textit{construction} does the conferring. No actual people's opinion counts.

Let me simply state the conventionalist position as the view that essentiality is conferred by our conventions and consider now the familiar argument against conventionalism that goes like this.\textsuperscript{83}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Cf. David Wiggins in \textit{Sameness and Substance} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 5. Of course, in outlining the preconditions of singling objects out in experience, Wiggins offers an account of what makes objects what they are, i.e., an account of individuation in my sense.
\item Alan Sidelle is a notable exception. See his \textit{Necessity, Essence, and Individuation: A Defense of Conventionalism} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).
\item This formulation of the point is due to Catherine Z. Elgin in her “Making Up People and Things” in \textit{Between the
\end{footnotesize}
You say that the property of being an essential property of an object is conferred by our conventions. Doesn't that mean that in the absence of these conventions there would not be any essentiality? Let's now assume that being a dinosaur is an essential property of some dinosaur, Dino, excavated by the good scientists of the British Museum. As they gently stroke Dino's bones with their toothbrushes they think "ah, being a dinosaur is essential to Dino". But now we have a problem: when Dino was running around in his prime there were no people and thus no conventions. Doesn't that mean that Dino was not essentially a dinosaur in his prime? And if so, isn't it counterintuitive that Dino was not essentially a dinosaur when he was alive, but when his bones have been excavated he is essentially a dinosaur?

One of the differences between my constructivist account of essentiality and a conventionalist account is that on my view there is no point in time at which the conferral takes place, and thus no time prior to the conferral that poses a problem. We do not, as some conventionalists such as Alan Sidelle do,\footnote{Sidelle, op. cit. p. 54 f.} tell a story in which prior to what does the individuation, i.e., the essential properties, there is some primordial stuff or cookie-dough. Our story is not a temporal one.\footnote{Elgin's constructive nominalism is also not a temporal position. Cf. op. cit.} It is a transcendental one in that it starts with already individuated objects and asks in virtue of what they are individuated. The answer we give is: they are individuated by their essential properties. We then ask further what makes a property essential to an object and the answer we give is that the ideal representatives of us concept users confer the property of being an essential property of the object onto the property in question.

Although we are now able to distinguish the constructivist conferralist view that I offer from a conventionalist conferralist view, a worry may arise precisely because there is no point in time at which the conferral takes place. Doesn't that mean that the conferral never takes place? No, it does not. Just as the Minoean vase's being fragile is not hostage to its actually getting struck at any point in time, so Arnold's being human essentially is not hostage to any ideal representatives' actual acts. Just as the vase is fragile because it would break if struck, so Arnold's being human is...
essential because ideal representatives would find it inconceivable that he not be human under ideal conditions.

Alright, perhaps the critic agrees that there are no special problems that the constructivist conferralist faces that have to do with temporality and that in that regard, the constructivist has the edge over the conventionalist. There may still linger the general worry facing all conferralist accounts: in the absence of the conventions or conceptual practices or whatever the case may be, would there be no essentiality? This is a generalized atemporal version of the Dino worry above.

I suspect that in most cases the critic who worries that in the absence of our conceptual practices there would be no essentiality is not really concerned about essentiality itself and that the impetus behind the worry is a very deep-felt intuition to the effect that Dino and his friends' existence is not hostage to the existence of humans and their thoughts. The critic's real concern is thus, I suspect, that if one accepts conferralism about essentiality lots of things follow that the realist might not want. Let's look at this more closely.

Since the conferralist about essentiality is committed to the view that essentiality is conferred by ideal representatives of us concept users, it seems that if there were no people and hence no conceptual practices that people engaged in, then there would be no essentiality, on the conferralist view. This is indeed so. The conferralist idea is that essentiality is not a sign of joints in nature, but an expression of commitments we have in using concepts. The question just is what follows from that about the objects we care about. For instance, if we had had different conceptual practices, would Dino have had different essential properties? Or, perhaps, would there have been no dinosaurs in that case?
The claim that if we had had different conceptual practices, Dino would have had different essential properties is simply false. Given that Dino is individuated by his essential properties, if there were a creature living in the Mesozoic era that had different essential properties from what Dino does have, it would be a different creature from Dino, the dinosaur we are talking about now.

The claim that if we had had difference conceptual practices, then there would have been no dinosaurs is ambiguous. We seem to be invited to imagine a world in which there are humans much like us, except they have different conceptual practices, and where there are creatures much like the Earthly dinosaurs. The ambiguity stems from uncertainty over whose description we are to adopt. Are we invited to use our concepts to describe the strange humans and the dinosaurs that are not classified like we do? If so, then clearly that is a world in which there are dinosaurs and strange humans with different conceptual practices. If, on the other hand, we are invited to describe, using our own concepts, what those humans find salient in their world and worth classifying, then we can say that in that world the category of dinosaur isn't useful. The strange humans don't think or talk about dinosaurs, but we can, using our own concepts.

We can frame and disambiguate the question whether there would be dinosaurs if we had different conceptual practices, but it gets a little harder when we want to take the next step and ask the sibling question: If there were no humans with conceptual practices, would there be no dinosaurs? We can disambiguate the question in a similar way. If we are invited to use our concepts to describe a world in which there are no humans, but plenty of dinosaurs, then clearly that is a world in which there are dinosaurs and no humans. If, on the other hand, we are invited

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86 Here I follow Catherine Z. Elgin, *op. cit.*
to step out of our conceptual practices to describe something or other, I don’t know how to comply. There is a long tradition of demanding an answer to questions such as this, but I think it is a mistake and that attempting to comply with that demand is tantamount to attempting to overstep the bounds of sense.\textsuperscript{87}

**CONCLUSION**

What I have offered in this chapter is an argument for my account of essentiality that proceeds by taking seriously our practice of engaging in thought experiments to gain knowledge of the essences of things and show how my account offers a very natural and effortless vindication of those practices. This is an advantage that my account has over realist accounts, since those practices pose at least a *prima facie* challenge to a realist account of essentiality.

\textsuperscript{87} Cf. the beginning of the Preface to the A edition of Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1781A and 1787B); *Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman Kemp Smith transl. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1929).
Conclusion

This dissertation was motivated by the desire to take a certain intuition seriously and find it a clear and coherent form. To what extent has that been accomplished?

The intuition, inherited from Kant, was that aspects of the world may in some way be dependent upon or constructed by human thought and practices. What I offered was a key component of an account of the individuation of objects—an account of what makes objects what they are—that traces the source of their individuation to our conceptual practices. This key component is an account of essentiality—the property of being an essential property of an object—as conferred by ideal representatives of us concept users.

To what extent does this account capture the Kantian intuition? It locates the source of essentiality in our practices, and not in an aspect of the world that is independent of us. Then, coupled with the thesis that objects are individuated by their essences or essential properties—a thesis not argued for here—we get an account of the individuation of objects that traces the source of that individuation to our conceptual practices. This is the sense in which objects are constructed or dependent upon us according to the articulation of the Kantian intuition I offer.

The account is an anti-realist account of a certain sort. It is conferralist as well as constructivist in the following modest sense: the subjects whose attitudes confer essentiality are not actual subjects, but rather hypothetical subjects constructed out of actual concept users by idealizing along an epistemic dimension. The ideal representatives are maximally attentive, logical, and mindful thinkers: maximally attentive to our actual conceptual practices, having gone through
experiments and imagined scenarios to reach an end-of-the-day verdict. The idea is, though, that the ideal representatives represent us, actual people with actual concept commitments. In that way, essentiality has its source in our actual conceptual practices.
Bibliography


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