

LeBar's Flaccidity: Is there Cause for Concern?
Commentary on Mark LeBar's "Rigidity and Response Dependence"
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Dave Beisecker, UNLV

1. For a certain property, such as green or good, to be response dependent, that property must yield to an analysis in terms of the responsive dispositions of suitably positioned and competent observers. For instance, if green turns out to be a response-dependent property, the question of whether or not something counts as being green turns out to be an issue of whether or not a competent observer would respond to it in a specific fashion under standard conditions. While one can appeal to response dependence to resist calls to provide intrinsic, mind-independent analyses of particular (paradigmatically non-primary) properties, this appeal cannot be had on the cheap. Defenders of response dependence incur several obligations of their own, including in particular, that of providing proper specifications of 1) suitable observers, 2) standard conditions, and 3) appropriate responses.

2. LeBar's paper primarily concerns the first of these obligations, that of identifying appropriate observers. According to a *rigid* construal of response dependence, the exemplification of a response-dependent property ought to be spelled out in terms of the responsive dispositions of subjects in this the actual world (in other words, us). If they weren't, then it seems possible for the following unsettling scenario to arise: objects or situations in some other possible world could turn out to exhibit or exemplify properties we intuitively think that they ought not possess, simply because the denizens of that world respond to them differently from the way we would. The properties that we intuitively think ought to be exemplified are not, because the inhabitants over there apparently do not take them to be exemplified.

3. LeBar finds this defense of rigidity unconvincing. To begin with, intuitions about the troubling scenarios deployed by the defenders of rigidity can be manipulated, or at least

their poignancy can be massaged away, once we take the time to flesh the scenarios out. Moreover, LeBar points out that appealing to our intuitions in this matter threatens to beg the question against non-rigid alternatives, for relying upon our own intuitions about what really is, say, good or green, to evaluate proposed analyses of those properties already seems to buy into the idea that it is our responses which determines whether that property is exemplified. The whole point of non-rigid (dare I say, *flaccid*) alternatives is that our intuitions don't have that kind of authority. Instead, in those counterfactual cases where our own judgements about whether a certain property is exemplified *differ* from those of the denizens of that world, LeBar urges us to accept their judgements. It is their world, after all; who are we to judge their responses as radically mistaken?

4. So what is LeBar's motivation here? Why is he so concerned about making room for flaccid flavors of response dependence? I think it goes something like this. Dissatisfied with mind-independent analyses of moral properties in particular, and unwilling to embrace anti-realist (projectivist) alternatives, LeBar sees in response dependence the best hope for saving moral realism. And here I gather that he takes the major objections to response dependence to be directed at rigid, but not flaccid, versions of that idea. But if so, that suggests that LeBar must have in his back pocket some further, and indeed stronger, reasons for preferring flaccidity. In the interest of full disclosure, then, I think I should begin by inviting LeBar to share those other reasons with us. That is, what exactly are those further objections to rigid response dependence that leave flaccid response dependence relatively unscathed?¹

5. Now I'm no more impressed with the foregoing argument for rigidity than is LeBar. However, I suspect that my complaints against it also undermine the case that LeBar builds. In particular, I worry that both parties here neglect the third obligation listed at the beginning of these remarks- that of adequately specifying the relevant *responses* for purportedly response-dependent properties.

¹ I gather that LeBar thinks flaccid accounts can escape the dilemma that Holland constructs in his discussion of "moral twin-Earth" (which isn't vastly different from the twin scenarios envisaged in the argument for rigidity). If so, then LeBar's defense of non-rigidity hinges on whether its treatment of moral

6. Recall that the argument for rigidity begins by bidding us to imagine a world whose inhabitants respond to objects or situations in ways very different from how we would respond to them. For example, it is supposed that the subjects in another world are apt to have red visual sensations in circumstances that would provoke green sensations in us. Observe that setting things up like this assumes that there's a principled basis for sorting visual sensations into types. Rather than challenging this assumption, LeBar's reply has us imagining different ways in which the envisaged scenario could have come about. Indeed, one might *have* to countenance such possibilities in order for any real difference between rigid and flaccid construals of some purportedly response-dependent property to emerge. However, it is far from clear that *having a green visual sensation* is the kind of response that can support a response dependent analysis of green. For it is notoriously difficult to specify in turn what it means for subjects to have green visual sensations, except in terms of the sensations a subject standardly has in the presence of green things. And that clearly won't do for this purpose, because it suggests that an analysis of the notion of a subject's having a green visual sensation already requires an antecedent understanding of what it is for something to be green. If anything, the notion of a green visual sensation already relies upon a prior understanding of what it is for something to be green.²

7. The situation doesn't improve all that much if instead we rely upon more overt kinds of responses. Suppose that we try to analyze the green things in some world *W* to be those that competent observers in *W* are disposed to *classify as* green under standard circumstances. For instance, one might understand the green things to be those that subjects in *W* are disposed to *say* are green. But once again, how are we to pick out these responses; how are we to understand the notion of a subject's classifying *something as green*? Such a task seemingly requires a story about how to identify their mental or verbal representations of greenness. The trouble for the defender of response dependence is that on the most promising accounts of meaning, identifying the mental or verbal

twin-Earth fares any better than rigid accounts. Arguably it does not, for it isn't clear to me that non-rigid accounts of moral properties make any more room for productive moral disputation than rigid ones.

representation of green relies upon a prior sense of which objects actually are green. So just like sensations, representations of green appear to be conceptually dependent upon the property of being green. We thus find that the intuitions that LeBar dismisses as non-probative have snuck right back into the picture.³

8. LeBar elides this issue by assuming that we share the same language as those on our twin worlds- that their term for green is the one that sounds strikingly similar to our term for green. As a result, he presents us with the following choice: either we're with him and we accept that things in W have non-intuitive response-dependent properties, or we're agin' him and we conclude that the perceptions and judgements made by the folks in W are radically mistaken. While I applaud LeBar's charitable attitude towards the inhabitants of W, I can't help but think that this is a false alternative. We can remain charitable and preserve our intuitions merely by taking their term for green to be that which they apply properly to things we take to be green. It's no matter at all that that term might sound eerily like our term for, say, red, for there is no reason to presume that we speak the same language. After all, we live on different worlds and defer to different experts.

9. And the same goes for good as for green... or maybe not. Perhaps this line of criticism applies more to phenomenal properties than to the value properties that lie at the heart of LeBar's project. Indeed, it does seem that it might be easier to make a case for response dependence for moral and aesthetic properties than for phenomenal ones. Still, the challenge is to pick out the responses that constitute moral approbation and disapprobation, without resting upon antecedent moral evaluations of the conditions that elicit those responses. Simply providing a label for such responses, such as "those connected to appropriate approbation" just won't do. But as LeBar recognizes, any story about how to identify value-constituting responses would have to be immensely complicated, and would have "to include special requirements for reflection and deliberation (among other things)." (p. 8) In other words, such responses will have to be

² Sellars, of course, defends a similar claim in part III of "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind."

³ Perhaps the defender of rigidity is (clumsily) making the point that such intuitions cannot be avoided.

part of a broader pattern of responses. We won't be able to pick them out atomistically. The worry is that once one fleshes out how a response qualifies as value-constitutive, then there'll be no room left for the possibilities that LeBar wants us to envision. That is, in the specification of the requisite pattern of responses, one builds in constraints that preclude the moral approbation of such things as inflicting pain for fun. Rather than concluding that they have values that vary greatly from our own, the subjects in the alien worlds LeBar wants us to imagine simply turn out by our lights to be altogether uninterpretable. It remains to be seen whether LeBar can give an adequate account of the responses that would support a response-dependent analysis of moral properties, and which allows for the possibilities his argument against rigidity presupposes, but I think it incumbent upon him at least to *begin* to do so, before we become tempted by *any* response-dependent account of value properties, be it of either the rigid or the flaccid variety.