Response-Dependence, Noumenalism, and Ontological Mystery

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Let us call representations such as concepts and terms ‘response-dependent’ just in case they are connected in an a priori manner to responses of suitably situated subjects to their referents. To possess the concept red and master the term ‘red’, on this view, is to possess the concept and master the term that are linked to the responses of normal human beings to objects that appear red to them under normal conditions. Notions of response-dependence trace to John Locke’s (1979) analysis of secondary-quality concepts (or ‘ideas’). On one reading of Locke, the concept red is the concept of something to which normal human beings respond by perceiving that it is red under normal conditions. Tracing the notion forward, on one reading of Immanuel Kant (1998), all concepts are connected in an a priori manner to responses that normal human beings have to objects that appear to them in particular ways.1 Because he understands all concepts in terms of how they relate to human beings, Kant has been called the first to give a thoroughgoing ‘anthropocentric’ account of knowledge.2 For Kant, all concepts are connected in an a priori manner to paradigmatic anthropocentric responses.

Recently there has been much interest among analytic philosophers in response-dependence theories. Most theories proposed have been, like Locke’s, local. They concern only some concepts.3 One prominent response-dependence theory, however, takes its cue not from Locke but from Kant. Philip Pettit (2005b) has proposed a global response-dependence theory, according to which all concepts and terms are linked to human responses. In fact Pettit himself explicitly calls all such representations ‘anthropocentric’ (2005b: 13–7, 53–8). While Pettit introduces his global theory to rebut skepticism about rule-following (1990; 1996: chs. 2, 4; 2005b: essay 1), my interest is not in whether Pettit succeeds in doing so. It is instead in the price that Pettit must pay to be a global response-dependence theorist in the first place. As Michael Smith and Daniel Stoljar (1998) explain, Pettit’s theory entails noumenalism, the thesis that reality possesses an intrinsic nature that remains unknowable.4

Though Pettit acknowledges that his global response-dependence theory does entail noumenalism, he argues contra Smith and Stoljar that this commitment is not particularly problematic. For Pettit claims that his noumenalism, like Kant’s own, admits of ontological and epistemic construals. Pettit takes Smith and Stoljar to construe noumenalism ontologically, according to which there is some ‘nature’ or ‘realm’ of existence that is separate and inaccessible from the one in which we reside. Pettit himself construes noumenalism epistemically. While there...
is only one realm, ours, we can know properties in it only insofar as they affect us. We can never know them in and of themselves. Pettit concludes that the ontological construal of noumenalism is problematic, while the epistemic is not.

In this paper I shall show that while Smith and Stoljar are right that global response-dependence comes at the cost of noumenalism, Pettit’s epistemic construal of noumenalism comes at a cost also. It prevents Pettit from knowing whether he is committed to another ontological worry. Instead of positing a realm separate and inaccessible from our own, Pettit might have to posit separate and inaccessible provinces of our realm, and his epistemic construal of noumenalism blocks his ever knowing whether these provinces do in fact exist. I conclude that Pettit faces a trilemma. He can construe noumenalism ontologically and face Smith and Stoljar’s charge of what I shall now call ‘realm ontological mystery’. He can construe noumenalism epistemically and what I shall in turn call ‘provincial ontological mystery’. Or he can reject global response-dependence outright. Moreover, anyone entertaining a global response-dependence theory would face the same.

My plan in this paper is as follows. In §1 I formally introduce Pettit’s global response-dependence theory. In §2 I summarize Smith and Stoljar’s reason for thinking that Pettit’s theory entails noumenalism and present Pettit’s own epistemic construal of the thesis. In §3 I urge that Pettit’s global response-dependence theory, according to which all terms are connected in an a priori manner to paradigmatic anthropocentric responses, is unstable. It gives way to the view that all terms for a community (or ethnos) are connected in an a priori manner to paradigmatic responses of members of that community. Pettit’s theory therefore slides from anthropocentrism into ethnocentrism. I establish this by comparing Pettit’s global response-dependence theory to what I (perhaps heterodoxically) interpret as Thomas Kuhn’s own global response-dependence one. This allows me in §4 to show that if Pettit does construe noumenalism epistemically, then he cannot know whether he is committed to provincial ontological mystery. In §5 I explain that Pettit therefore faces the trilemma just mentioned. I then argue that Pettit should stick with the middle option: he should continue construing noumenalism epistemically and accept that he cannot know whether there exist provinces of reality that are separate from and inaccessible to us. In §6 I close with lessons for global response-dependence theorists generally. Our local investment in Pettit returns its own global rewards.

1. Global Response-Dependence

Pettit offers a global response-dependence theory jointly of concepts and terms, though I shall concentrate on the latter. Pettit asks us to suppose that ‘P’ (in English) names a semantically basic term, i.e. a term learned via exposure to ostensible objects instantiating the property P. He explains: ‘something is P if and only if it is such that it would seem P—people would be disposed to use “P” to describe the corresponding property to it—under normal conditions of
observation’ (2005b: 136). Something is then red, and in English named ‘red’, just in case suitably situated subjects respond to it as red. On Pettit’s view, semantically basic terms are response-dependent because their mastery depends on ‘contingencies of subjective response’ (2005a: 181) that we have toward their referents. Of course not all terms are semantically basic. Some are complex, as Pettit realizes. Nonetheless, on his view, terms that are not basic are all defined via those that are. All terms are connected to anthropocentric responses.

Pettit does insist that ‘something is P if and only it is such that it would seem P . . . under normal conditions of observation’ (2005b: 136), where ‘P’ names a property and not a term. Does Pettit offer a global response-dependence theory of properties also? He does not. According to Pettit, ‘red’ (e.g.) refers to a property that is response-independent. ‘[L]ike a spectral reflectance, [the property] may be the sort of thing that can exist in the absence of the community and in the absence of any thinking thing’ (Jackson and Pettit 2002: 99). Still Pettit maintains that what allows us to pick out the property as red are its effects on us. That suitably situated subjects perceive something as red just in case it is red is not, on Pettit’s view, an ontological fact about red. It is instead an epistemic fact about how we identify red and a semantic fact about what we name ‘red’. Regardless of what red really is, we know when we see red (as opposed to some other property) because under normal conditions of observation red looks red to us. We then call what under normal conditions looks red to us ‘red’. Thus, Pettit maintains, while our way of picking out red is response-dependent, and our term ‘red’ is response-dependent also, red itself is not.

Let us follow Smith and Stoljar, Pettit’s critics, and grant that Pettit’s theory can be made to work. Its appeal is not hard to understand. For starters, Pettit’s global theory globalizes what many find appealing about local response-dependence theories. There really are things to which response-dependent terms (e.g. ‘red’) refer, and on Pettit’s view terms that do not refer (e.g. ‘red swan’) are nonetheless all defined via those that do. Though Pettit’s theory is not a form of Platonic realism, according to which the referents of all terms are identifiable independently of human responses, it is not a form of Berkeleian idealism, according to which referents of all terms are purely mental, either. Because response-dependent terms do refer to properties in an extra-mental reality, we can follow Pettit (2005b: essay 2) in regarding his theory as entailing a mild form of realism. Moreover, because Pettit, unlike the Platonist, links terms to human responses, he can understand all terms as connected to human beings without disconnecting any from the world.

Global response-dependence theories, such as Pettit’s and others’, are also appealing in virtue of the variety of ends toward which they can be put. As we saw earlier, Pettit employs his in the context of skepticism about rule-following. If Pettit is correct, then human beings are disposed to respond similarly when in similar situations, and also to check one another’s as well as their own responses over time to force conformity. Pettit concludes from this that our terms are projectible in a norm-governed manner over an infinite number of objects, while these terms are nonetheless learnable by finite minds such as ours. Further, Pettit
and apparently Hilary Putnam both interpret Kant (1998) as a kind of global response-dependence theorist also, and I concur. Kant’s strategy is to distinguish the world as it appears to us (and so to which we can respond) from the world as it is in itself (and so to which we cannot respond). By arguing that our responses to the former are structured by our own forms of intuition and categories of understanding, Kant aims to explain how knowledge itself is possible. Additionally, Putnam’s (1981: essay 1) own argument against brain-in-the-vat skepticism relies on our concepts and terms being able to refer only to objects to which we can respond. Because the skeptic cannot refer to what she (mistakenly) thinks that she means by ‘vat’, Putnam contends, the skeptic cannot formulate her worry. Putnam folds that argument into broader discussions of what he calls ‘internal realism’. Since Putnam (1981: essay 3) self-consciously models internal realism on those aspects of Kant’s view that are globally response-dependent, he is a global response-dependence theorist too. Finally, as I understand him, Kuhn (1996, 2002) can be interpreted as a global response-dependence theorist also. For Kuhn maintains that objects are named and so categorized into the kinds that they are, for a particular historical community, in virtue of the responses of paradigmatic members of that community to them. Kuhn (2002: 101–2) is explicit that while he is a realist, he is not Putnam’s (1978: part 4; 1981: essay 3) despised ‘metaphysical’ or Platonic realist. Kuhn is instead a mild realist like Pettit. According to Pettit and Kuhn both, though some terms refer to extra-mental properties, all terms are linked to human responses. Nonetheless while Pettit links those terms to paradigmatic anthropocentric responses, Kuhn links them to paradigmatic ethnocentric responses: on his view, members of different communities name and categorize objects into different kinds. Kuhn uses these views to explain how scientific knowledge and change are possible.

Of course Kant’s, Putnam’s, Kuhn’s, and Pettit’s theories differ. For that reason my focus remains on Pettit’s, though in sections to come I shall find it useful to consider further similarities between Pettit and Kuhn. In particular by comparing Pettit to Kuhn I shall argue that Pettit’s anthropocentrism slides into ethnocentrism, which creates problems for him elsewhere. First, however, I must examine Smith and Stoljar’s (1998) contention that Pettit’s global response-dependence theory entails noumenalism.

2. From Global Response-Dependence to Noumenalism

As Smith and Stoljar (1998) understand it, Pettit requires that our responses to the world are to dispositional properties in the world that affect us in certain ways. We respond to an object as red, and in English call it ‘red’, not necessarily because the object appears red at the moment (perhaps the lighting is off), but because the object has the disposition to appear red to normal observers under normal conditions. Smith and Stoljar then explicitly assume that every disposition must have a non-dispositional base. Their idea seems to be that every disposition, as a causal power efficacious in only certain circumstances, is underlain by a fixed
structure. Next Smith and Stoljar implicitly assume that knowing the nature of something requires being able to respond to it. Because our responses are always to dispositions and never to their bases, the nature of the bases themselves remain unknowable. All that we can know about them, on Smith and Stoljar’s view, is that they support the disposition to which a response-dependent term refers.

Smith and Stoljar conclude from this that Pettit is committed to noumenal realism or ‘noumenalism’, the thesis that:

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\ldots \text{there is an independent reality, but the intrinsic nature of that reality is unknowable. The world is a certain way in and of itself but, given the nature of our concepts [and terms], we cannot think or say what that way is, but can only ever think or say what relations the world stands in to us. (Smith and Stoljar 1998: 87)}
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Though Smith and Stoljar say little about why noumenalism is problematic, their point seems to be that the notion of an ‘intrinsic nature’ of reality that is unknowable ‘in and of itself’ suggests that reality somehow bifurcates into two natures or realms, only one of which we can access. Critics of Platonic realism have long worried about how we are meant to make contact with numbers, forms, and other abstracta, denizens of some second realm in which, according to the Platonist, we do not (normally) reside. The noumenalist seems to posit a second realm also, this one consisting of the way the world is in itself. While the Platonist thinks that we can commune with his second realm, however, the noumenalist denies that we can commune with her own. She is instead in the awkward position of agreeing with the Platonist’s foes that no explanation of how we can access any such alleged second realm is forthcoming, while agreeing with the Platonist himself that an alleged second realm nonetheless exists. And Smith and Stoljar find this position awkward enough to avoid.

Pettit counters Smith and Stoljar’s worry by urging that noumenalism admits of an ontological and epistemic construal, each one supported by a different understanding of the referents of response-dependent terms (Pettit 2005b: overview to Part I, essay 3). According to the ontological construal of noumenalism, response-dependent terms refer to worldly dispositions that cause normal observers under normal conditions to respond in certain ways. This is Pettit’s gloss on the view that Smith and Stoljar attribute to him, which we just considered. On this view, the referent of ‘red’ is whatever dispositional property plays the role of looking red to those observers under those conditions.\textsuperscript{10} Pettit calls this kind of property a ‘role-property’. We paradigmatically utter ‘red’, then, when responding to a role-property. And role-properties are themselves response-dependent: whatever property plays the role of looking red to us is the property that it is \textit{because} it looks red to us. Now Pettit explicitly agrees with Smith and Stoljar that every disposition must have a non-dispositional base. He also implicitly agrees that knowing the nature of something requires being able to respond to it. Thus, Pettit concedes, if response-dependent terms refer to

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\textsuperscript{10} Smith and Stoljar (1998) mention dispositions that ‘cause normal observers to respond in certain ways’, but their discussion does not clarify whether or not role-properties include the non-dispositional bases that Pettit in fact believes response-dependent terms must have.

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role-properties, then we can know nothing about the nature of the bases that underlie them. Put differently, this construal of noumenalism is ontological because it is ‘two-world’: one world of properties, role-properties, supervenes on a distinct world of properties, their non-dispositional bases. And we can know nothing about the bases themselves.

The second construal of noumenalism, and the one that Pettit prefers, is epistemic. According to it, ‘red’ refers not to the dispositional property that plays the role of looking red but to the non-dispositional property that realizes the disposition to look red. This, Pettit notes, is to understand the referents of response-dependent terms as ‘realizer-properties’. Realizer-properties are the non-dispositional bases meant to underlie the role-properties to which Smith and Stoljar appealed. And realizer-properties are themselves response-independent: they are the properties that they are in virtue of objective features on the world rather than the subjective effects of those features on us. In the case of red, as I quoted Pettit earlier, the realizer-property can be something ‘like a spectral reflectance’ (Jackson and Pettit 2002: 99). Nonetheless Pettit concedes: ‘[W]e use [response-dependent] terms to ascribe certain objective properties, realizer-properties, ‘in virtue of the fact that those properties have certain disposing effects on us’ (2005b: 19, my emphasis). Red, understood as a realizer-property, has the disposing effect of causing us to perceive red, even if this effect is not itself constitutive of the objective nature of red. This is Pettit’s point from §1 that though red is response-independent, and so is the property that it because of its objective features, we nonetheless identify and name red via the effects that it realizes in us.

Now by understanding response-dependent terms as referring to realizer-properties, Pettit maintains that we can take noumenalism, not to be the ontological thesis that there exists an inaccessible realm of non-dispositional bases realizing our role-properties, but to be the epistemic thesis that there exists a single salient realm of properties, realizer-properties, that we nevertheless can know only in their effects and never in themselves. Noumenalism no longer concerns limitations on the properties to which we can refer: we do refer to objective properties, realizer-properties, in the world. It now concerns limitations on what we can know about those properties. Hence Pettit’s preferred construal of noumenalism is epistemic because it is ‘two-aspect’: we respond to realizers only insofar as they affect us, and so we can know them only in their effects; nonetheless our terms refer to them regardless.

Moreover, once Pettit introduces his epistemic construal of noumenalism, he (2005b: 112–4) argues that the noumenalism that does result from his theory is benign. Here Pettit relies on Rae Langton’s (2001) epistemic construal of Kant’s own noumenalism. The lesson of noumenalism, according to Langton and Pettit both, is not that there is some ontologically mysterious reality underlying our experience. It is instead that we should be epistemically humble. Though there is only one reality, and though (now specifically on Pettit’s view) our terms refer to realizer-properties that populate that reality, we can know those realizer-properties only in their effects. We can never know them in themselves. Hence while we have semantic access to the world as it really is, we must not be
arrogant in our epistemic pronouncements about that world. For we can know the world only insofar as it affects us. And Pettit, like Langton, maintains that though ontological mystery is problematic, epistemic humility is not.

I agree with Pettit that noumenalism can be construed as counselling epistemic humility rather than invoking ontological mystery. I also agree that epistemic humility is on its own terms unproblematic. Nonetheless, I now want to argue, the price of construing noumenalism epistemically is that Pettit cannot know whether he is committed to a different variety of ontological mystery. He must then either (i) accept one form of ontological mystery, (ii) accept not knowing whether he is committed to another form of ontological mystery, or (iii) reject his global response-dependence theory itself. I cannot, however, show this straightaway. Rather I must first compare Pettit’s account of how terms are learned to the account proposed by Kuhn. I shall conclude that Pettit’s view gives way to Kuhn’s—and in the section that follows that this is a contributing factor to why Pettit faces his trilemma.

3. Pettit and Kuhn on Learning Terms

Pettit\textsuperscript{11} begins his account of how response-dependent terms are learned by acknowledging that any finite set of examples instantiates an infinite number of realizer-properties. Though Pettit provides no worked-out example, his idea seems to be that a ripe strawberry, fire engine, and oxygenated blood all instantiate the properties of being red, being movable, being disposed to fall to the earth if let go from a second-story window, and countless other properties. Pettit next postulates that all human beings have a ‘ground-level disposition or habit . . . to extrapolate spontaneously in a given direction, taking the examples to be instances of a kind’ (2005b: 142). While the strawberry, fire engine, and blood do all instantiate all these properties, human beings tend to extrapolate spontaneously in the direction of taking them to be examples of red objects. If Anglophonic, we would then call them ‘red’. As Pettit explains elsewhere (2005b: 36; Jackson and Pettit 2002: 103), though any such set of examples instantiates an infinite number of realizers, human beings can take it to exemplify a finite set of realizers based on what we find salient about those objects. Unlike instantiation, exemplification is therefore relative to the interests and abilities, and so ultimately to the responses, of human beings. Finally, Pettit postulates that human beings have a higher-order disposition or habit to refuse to endorse extrapolations if discrepant across persons or times, and a practice to explain such discrepancies. Suppose that someone takes the strawberry, fire engine, and blood to exemplify green. We would be disposed to reject that extrapolation, trying instead to figure out what went wrong. (Perhaps the subject is color blind.) Because of the centrality of dispositions and habits to it, Pettit calls this response-dependence account ‘ethocentric’. He explains:

The sort of story I have told about how we might get the concept of redness [and also the term ‘red’] can be described as ‘ethocentric’. It gives
centre stage to habits of response and practices of self-correction, and both notions are captured in the Greek word *ethos*. (2005b: 66)

This response-dependent ethocentric account is strikingly similar to Kuhn’s own account of how neophytes in a scientific community learn terms such as ‘pendulum’ (1996: 118–20, 150), ‘duck’ (1979: 308–19; 2002: 51), and ‘planet’ (2002: 15, 94). Kuhn, like Pettit, thinks that such learning occurs through dispositions or habits to extrapolate in response to ostended examples. Kuhn, like Pettit, thinks that there are higher-order dispositions or habits that enforce conformity. Kuhn, like Pettit, thinks that individual learning is done in a social environment. And Kuhn, like Pettit, thinks that learning via ostension and habitual extrapolation is psychologically as well as logically prior to following explicitly articulated rules. Hence, on Kuhn’s view, for members of a particular community to master a term, they must master the way in which the term is connected to responses of normal members of their community under normal conditions. Though no one has called it this, I conclude that Kuhn’s account is response-dependent and ethocentric both. Nor do the similarities between Pettit and Kuhn stop there. Kuhn, like Pettit, even recognizes that something unknowable like ‘Kant’s *Ding an sich*’ (2002: 104), which underlies the world to which we respond, follows from his views. Kuhn, like Pettit, recognizes a commitment to a form of noumenalism.12

Unlike Pettit’s, however, Kuhn’s ethocentric story is explicitly ethnocentric in nature. Though Pettit urges that community conformity becomes important when deciding whether an individual’s extrapolation is adequate, Kuhn maintains that the community (or *ethnos*) teaches the individual how to extrapolate directly. Thus Kuhn talks about the teacher as a member of a community ostending to objects for the neophyte rather than the neophyte extrapolating without initial guidance. Further, on Kuhn’s view, different communities teach their neophytes to extrapolate differently and so to categorize the same objects as different kinds. Kuhn might agree with Pettit that an object is red, and in English properly called ‘red’, just in case it appears to normal human observers in normal conditions as red. Kuhn, however, insists that members of different communities respond to objects in more community-specific ways too.

A telling example of Kuhn’s ‘ethno-ethocentric’ story concerns the community-specific categorization of astronomical objects. This also serves to introduce Kuhn’s (2002) notion of a lexical taxonomy (or ‘lexicon’).13 According to Kuhn, a lexicon is a set of kind terms figuring as nodes in a network that is structured according to the species—genus relations in the world to which scientists in particular communities respond. Kuhn explains that the (Anglophonic) Ptolemaic teaches neophytes to respond to the sun, the moon, Venus, Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, by constructing a lexicon in which the terms ‘the sun’, ‘the moon’, ‘Venus’, ‘Mercury’, ‘Mars’, ‘Jupiter’, and ‘Saturn’ figure under ‘planet’. The Ptolemaic therefore categorizes *planet* as the genus of which the sun, the moon, Venus, etc., are species. The Copernican teaches neophytes to respond to the same objects with the terms ‘the sun’, ‘the moon’, ‘Venus’, ‘Mercury’, ‘Mars’, ‘Jupiter’, and ‘Saturn’, respectively, too. Nonetheless the Copernican structures
the last four terms under ‘planet’, the first under ‘star’, and the second under ‘satellite’. The Copernican therefore categorizes planet as the genus whose species include Venus, Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn; while star and satellite are themselves genera whose species include the sun and the moon, respectively.\textsuperscript{14} On my reading of him, Kuhn is therefore a response-dependence theorist who relativizes terms to communities, in the form of lexica governing those communities’ responses.

Can Pettit resist the sort of ethnocentrism propounded by Kuhn? I think not. Kuhn is right that the Ptolemaic responds to the sun as a planet while the Copernican responds to the same object as a star. That is incontrovertible. Nor is this ethnocentrism an expression of Kuhn’s earlier claim that members of different communities ‘are responding to a different world’ (1996: 111). Kuhn’s mature (2002) view is that members of different communities respond to the same world, though sometimes when they do so they categorize objects in that world differently. The Ptolemaic and Copernican agree that the sun exists; they disagree on whether to categorize it as a planet or a star. Even outspoken foes of linguistic relativism could accept this tame ethnocentrism. Moreover, to the extent that anyone dismisses Kuhn, anthropologists, following trails blazed by the likes of Ruth Benedict (2006) and Edward Evans-Pritchard (1967), have long identified communities that respond to familiar objects in unfamiliar ways. Though his theory does not countenance such ethnocentric differences, Pettit would have to endorse some degree of ethnocentrism. Otherwise he would be ignoring the very real—and in our astronomical case very apparent—taxonomic differences between communities. In particular he would be ignoring that the Ptolemaic really does categorize the sun as a planet while the Copernican really does categorize it as a star. Endorsing even the tame form of ethnocentrism that I have discussed, however, commits Pettit to the possibility of a different kind of ontological mystery.

4. The Possibility of Provincial Ontological Mystery

Suppose that Pettit does endorse the tame ethnocentric global response-dependence that I am suggesting and Kuhn’s astronomical example also. What on Pettit’s view explains why the Ptolemaic and Copernican categorize the sun differently? As we shall see, Pettit can give either one of two answers. Because the first entails a variety of ontological mystery while the second does not, and Pettit’s epistemic construal of noumenalism prevents adjudicating between the two answers, Pettit cannot know whether he is committed to this different variety of mystery itself.

The first answer that Pettit can give to the question of why the Ptolemaic and Copernican categorize the sun differently relies on Pettit’s own distinction between instantiation and exemplification. Recall that, according to Pettit, while an object instantiates all the properties inherent in it, human beings take the object to exemplify far fewer properties. Since, on Pettit’s view, exemplification is relative
to the interests and abilities of human beings, his answer here would be that
different communities habituate their members to have different interests and
abilities. Their indoctrination into their respective community would have
trained them to be interested in and able to respond to different things.
Consequently members of different communities can take the same object to
exemplify different realizer-properties. Perhaps the Ptolemaic’s and Copernican’s
interests and abilities cause them both to perceive the sun’s motion as geocentric,
while only the Copernican’s cause her to recognize such motion as merely
apparent. Because the Ptolemaic regards the sun’s (apparent) geocentric motion
as indicative of its being a planet, while the Copernican regards the sun’s (real)
stationary motion relative to the earth as indicative of its being the earth’s star,
the former regards the sun as a planet while the latter regards it as a star. In short
the Ptolemaic, responding to one set of exemplified properties (disposing him to
perceive apparent motion), takes the sun to be a planet; the Copernican,
responding to a different set (disposing her to perceive apparent and real motion),
takes it to be a star. According to this first answer, the Ptolemaic and Copernican
categorize the sun differently because they are responding to different realizer-
properties. The Ptolemaic’s and Copernican’s term ‘motion’ when applied to the
sun would then itself refer to different realizers.

The second answer that Pettit can give to the question of why the Ptolemaic
and Copernican categorize the sun differently relies on a distinction between
degrees of ethnocentrism. Pettit could maintain that though the Ptolemaic and
Copernican both take the sun to exemplify the same set of properties, they each
respond to those properties sometimes in less and sometimes in more ethnocentric
ways. Consider how this might work with red. On Pettit’s view, Chinese and
Americans alike respond to the same property as red, insofar as normal observers
of each community under normal conditions perceive objects that exemplify that
property as red. Nonetheless Chinese might also respond to the property by
perceiving it as the color worn by brides, while Americans might perceive it as a
color not worn by brides. The same property, red, can therefore elicit multiple
responses. Some responses, such as perceiving the color red, might be shared
between communities. Others, such as perceiving the color worn by brides, might
not be. Similarly, on Pettit’s view, the Ptolemaic and Copernican could both
respond to the same set of realizer-properties that the sun exemplifies, insofar as
under normal conditions both regard the object that exemplifies that set as the
sun. Nonetheless the Ptolemaic might also respond to those properties by
categorizing the sun as a planet. The Copernican might do so by categorizing the
sun as a star. Perhaps the Ptolemaic is disposed to respond to the set of properties
causing the sun’s motion by perceiving that motion as geocentric, while the
Copernican, differently trained, is disposed to respond to the same set by
perceiving the sun’s motion as relatively stationary vis-à-vis the earth. As with
red so with the sun, each community trains its neophytes to respond in ways that
are shared between communities and in ways that are not. According to this
second answer, the Ptolemaic and Copernican categorize the sun differently
because they are responding to the same set of realizer-properties differently.
This time the Ptolemaic’s and Copernican’s terms ‘motion’ when applied to the sun would refer to the same realizers, even though the Ptolemaic and Copernican would be affected by those realizers in different ways.

There are then two answers to the question of what on Pettit’s view explains why the Ptolemaic and Copernican categorize the sun differently. The Ptolemaic and Copernican respond to either different realizer-properties or the same realizer-properties differently. They both offer explanations of why the Ptolemaic categorizes the sun as a planet while the Copernican categorizes it as a star. Now these two answers cannot both be right. They make conflicting claims. So which is right? According to Pettit, why do the Ptolemaic and Copernican categorize the sun differently? Pettit’s epistemic construal of noumenalism makes it impossible ever to know. Since, if Pettit is right, we can know realizer-properties never in themselves but only in their effects, we can never know whether members of different communities respond to either different realizer-properties or the same realizer-properties differently. We can then never know whether members of different communities refer to different or the same properties either. After all as the two answers that Pettit could give to our question illustrate, both scenarios have the same effects. Both would cause the Ptolemaic and Copernican to categorize the sun differently. Worse, as Kuhn claims, adopting a different set of responses to the world by adopting a different lexicon, and so changing communities, is definitive of a scientific revolution. But then the same person before and after a revolution responds (and so refers) to either different or the same realizer-properties also. For the same person could switch from being a Ptolemaic to being a Copernican.

This is an awkward result. But what does it have to do with Pettit’s debate with Smith and Stoljar? Pettit rejected the idea that we respond to a realm of role-properties underlain by a different realm of realizers. Construing noumenalism epistemically permitted him instead to maintain that there is only one salient realm of properties, realizer-properties, though we can know these properties only in their effects. I have just now shown that Pettit must say that members of different communities— and so even potentially the same person at different times—respond to either different or the same realizer-properties, and Pettit cannot eliminate either disjunct. On his view, therefore, members of different communities refer to either different or the same realizer-properties. Hence they may or may not have semantic access to the same parts of the world. Though there is no separate, inaccessible realm of properties, there may be separate, inaccessible provinces of properties instead. If members of different communities respond to different realizers, then they respond to different provinces. If they respond to the same realizers differently, however, then there is no reason to talk about separate provinces: rather than determining which properties their members can access, communities determine which effects those properties will have on them. If members of different communities respond to the same realizers, therefore, then we can say that they respond to the same properties in toto in different ways. And, as we have seen, Pettit’s epistemic construal of noumenalism prevents him from knowing which possibility obtains.
Now consider these two possibilities more closely. The first is a form of ontological mystery. Because members of different communities are limited in referring not to an entire realm but only to particular provinces of properties, let us call the resulting view ‘provincial ontological mystery’. According to provincial ontological mystery, members of different communities, in virtue of being members of their particular community, can refer to only some properties. There are provinces of properties of the world as it really is that, insofar as they are members of one community rather than another, they cannot access. Calling this form of ontological mystery ‘provincial’ distinguishes it from what we may call ‘realm ontological mystery’, the variety that Smith and Stoljar proposed and of which Pettit disposed. According to both forms of ontological mystery, human beings are disconnected from the world as it really is, ‘in and of itself’. On the realm variety, the disconnect is absolute. There is an entire realm of properties to which no human being can refer. On the provincial variety of ontological mystery, the disconnect is only partial. Nonetheless it is very much real. The Ptolemaic cannot refer to the same set of properties to which the Copernican refers; she has no semantic access to that part of the world as it really is. And this is so even though the Ptolemaic and Copernican are both observing the same object. Try as she might, the Ptolemaic cannot, on this first possibility, refer to the set of properties that realizes the sun’s relatively stationary motion vis-à-vis the earth—even when she looks at the sun itself. The Copernican can. Ethnocentric differences create semantic limitations, and ontological mystery re-emerges.

The second possibility, that members of different communities can have semantic access to the same properties but are nonetheless affected by those properties differently, is a form of epistemic humility. It entails that members of different communities, though able to refer to the same properties in themselves, can know those properties only in effects that differ between communities. Let us say that this second possibility encourages ‘provincial epistemic humility’. This time the provincialism concerns not the properties but their responders. Though members of different communities can refer to realizer-properties in themselves, they can know those properties only in the effects that they have on them as members of one particular community (or province of responders) as opposed to another. Conversely, the form of epistemic humility that Pettit adopts from Langton might be called ‘realm epistemic humility’. According to it, human beings can know realizer-properties in the effects on them as members of the human realm at large. Now, on this second possibility, provincial epistemic humility does obtain. The way in which the Ptolemaic knows the motion of the sun is different from the way in which the Copernican knows it, even though Ptolemaic and Copernican alike, when they refer to the sun’s ‘motion’, refer to the same set of realizers in and of themselves. The lesson of epistemic humility in its provincial and realm form is that the Ptolemaic and Copernican—as well as the rest of us—should be humble when making epistemic pronouncements. In the provincial form in particular human beings can know the properties of worldly objects only in our own provincial ways.
To be sure, regardless of which possibility does obtain, someone who is a Ptolemaic can become a Copernican. He can then refer to the same set of properties to which other Copernicans refer, on the first possibility, or continue to refer to the same set as he did when he was a Ptolemaic but now be affected by it as the Copernican herself is, on the second possibility. But that just adds to the bizarreness of Pettit’s view. For, as we have already seen, Pettit must admit that the same person at two different times refers to either different properties or the same properties differently, even when presented with the same object.

5. Resolving Pettit’s Trilemma

Let me take stock. Smith and Stoljar observed that Pettit’s global response-dependence came at a cost. That cost was noumenalism. Pettit tried to discount the cost by construing noumenalism epistemically. I have now shown that this epistemic construal comes with its own cost. Pettit cannot know whether he is committed to provincial ontological mystery. But if Pettit agrees with Smith and Stoljar that ontological mystery is problematic, then he should find the provincial variety problematic also. This introduces the trilemma, which I can mention here in full. (i) Pettit can construe noumenalism ontologically, as Smith and Stoljar think that he does. But then he is committed to realm ontological mystery, which, Smith and Stoljar are right, he should avoid. (ii) Pettit can construe noumenalism epistemically to avoid realm ontological mystery. But then he cannot know whether he is committed to provincial ontological mystery. And provincial ontological mystery is still a form of ontological mystery. Or (iii) Pettit can reject global response-dependence altogether.

What should Pettit pick? Should he rescind his own construal of noumenalism and endorse Smith and Stoljar’s, maintain his construal, or reject global response-dependence itself? In this section I answer that question. My strategy will be to consider Pettit’s three options in groups of two, beginning with the first two.

Option (i) is to construe noumenalism ontologically and be faced with realm ontological mystery. Option (ii) is to construe noumenalism epistemically and be unable to know whether he is faced with provincial ontological mystery. Of these, Pettit should opt for (ii). There are three reasons for this. First, (ii) is in the first instance an epistemic limitation. Pettit cannot know whether he is committed to a form of ontological mystery. Option (i) is a straightforwardly ontological limitation. Pettit is committed to a form of ontological mystery. Now Pettit himself prefers epistemic limitations. His epistemic construal of noumenalism is just such a limitation, and I explained above that he is correct to prefer epistemic over ontological constraints. Pettit should therefore prefer (ii) over (i).

Of course (ii) embodies an epistemic limitation about a possible ontological mystery. Pettit cannot know whether he is committed to a kind of ontological view that, he agrees with Smith and Stoljar, should be avoided. Nonetheless the second reason why Pettit should opt for (ii) is that not knowing whether one is committed to provincial ontological mystery is less undesirable than actually
being committed to realm ontological mystery. On the one hand, not knowing whether one is committed to \( x \) is consistent with one’s not being committed to \( x \). For all Pettit knows there are no separate provinces of properties. Any view according to which ontological mystery only possibly obtains is more palatable than any view according to which ontological mystery actually obtains. On the other hand, even if \((ii)\) does actually commit Pettit to the existence of ontological mystery, the form of mystery involved is itself less mysterious than the form of mystery associated with \((i)\). Inaccessible parts of an otherwise accessible world, even if guaranteed to be entailed by \((ii)\), are less mysterious than is an inaccessible world unto itself, entailed by \((i)\).

There is a third and final reason why Pettit should choose \((ii)\) over \((i)\). While the existence of a separate, inaccessible realm of properties has no intuitive appeal, the existence of separate, inaccessible provinces may have some. It is not so strange to think that our Ptolemaic and Copernican, both looking at the sun, would by dint of being a Ptolemaic or Copernican, respectively, be able to respond to different properties inherent in it. On this view, scientific training puts human beings in semantic touch with different properties in the world, sometimes different properties in objects with which members of different communities are already familiar. When Copernicus challenged the geocentric model of astronomy, he could be understood as having challenged astronomers to respond to more properties inherent in the sun than those to which they were already responding. In particular he could be understood as having maintained that they should respond to the set of properties realizing the sun’s relatively stationary position \textit{vis-à-vis} the earth. While the Copernican could agree with the Ptolemaic that the sun appears to revolves around the earth, the Copernican could insist that she alone recognizes that this is \textit{merely} apparent motion—something of which her training as a Copernican makes her aware. Her scientific training makes it possible for the Copernican to discuss realizer-properties that the Ptolemaic could not herself discuss. Though this is not the only way to understand what the Copernican revolution afforded scientists, it is not unintuitive to think that it did afford them it. And it is consistent with \((ii)\) rather than \((i)\).

I conclude that \((ii)\) should be retained and \((i)\) rejected. The question then becomes whether Pettit should embrace not knowing whether he is committed to provincial ontological mystery, entailed by \((ii)\), or reject his global response-dependence altogether, entailed by \((iii)\). Here again Pettit should choose \((ii)\). We have already seen that \((ii)\) is in the first instance an epistemic limitation, and Pettit is right not to be particularly troubled by those. We have also seen that the ontological possibility entailed by \((ii)\), provincial ontological mystery, remains \textit{only} a possibility. At best \textit{no} ontological mystery—realm or provincial—results. At worst the ontological mystery that does result is \textit{merely} provincial. And provincial ontological mystery, I have just suggested, may not be so unintuitive after all.

The possibility of provincial ontological mystery, however, is still the possibility of a form of ontological mystery. And Smith and Stoljar, and Pettit himself, are still correct in wanting to avoid such mystery. Nonetheless the
possibility of the provincial form is not so undesirable as to have Pettit embrace (iii) by rejecting global response-dependence itself. We can see this by considering three appealing things about global response-dependence. First, Pettit’s version of it might just be the correct account of how terms are learned. Pettit is right that we learn semantically basic terms in response to ostensible examples. Pettit’s paradigm is ‘red’, but ‘book’, ‘dog’, and ‘smooth’ are all learned response-dependently, and Kuhn has shown us that Pettit’s list can be expanded to include terms like ‘pendulum’, ‘duck’, and ‘planet’. Further, Johnston (1989) and McDowell (2001, essays 6, 7, and 10) make a credible case that we also learn value terms in a response-dependent manner. ‘Honesty’ and ‘beauty’ seem to be mastered in response to ostensibly honest acts and beautiful things. And W. V. Quine and Robert Brandom join Kuhn in persuasively arguing that what counts as an ostensible example is itself more sophisticated, and also more community relative, than someone like Pettit himself thinks. Quine is right that ‘x-ray tube’ (1977: 88) is observational for some communities, and Brandom is right that ‘mu-meson’ (1994: 223) is observational for others. Brandom in particular notes that particle physicists are trained to see mu-mesons when the rest of us see only streaks in gas chambers. For them, mu-mesons admit of ostensible examples. Now once we accept that words like ‘red’, ‘book’, ‘dog’, ‘loud’, ‘pendulum’, ‘duck’, and ‘planet’—and also like ‘honesty’, ‘beauty’, ‘x-ray tube’, and ‘mu-meson’—may all count as response-dependent on Pettit’s view, his global response-dependence view becomes more plausible. If so vast an array of terms may turn out to be response-dependent, then it is no longer difficult to imagine that terms that are not response-dependent can nonetheless all be defined via those that are.

Second, whether or not global response-dependence is the correct account of how terms are learned, the benefits of retaining global response-dependence as a research program are on balance greater than the cost of any possible provincial ontological mystery that might obtain. As I explained in §1, global response-dependence has proved fertile ground for Kant, Putnam, and Kuhn. Though their projects have their flaws, in each of their hands global response-dependence views have enriched the philosophical landscape. Pettit’s own use of global response-dependence to respond to rule-following skepticism promises to do the same. Further, response-dependent views have only recently become mainstream in the analytic literature, and even then the form of response-dependence has generally been local. Among analytic philosophers, the global variety remains under-explored. Though there might be a time when its resources are depleted, or when enough problems with global response-dependence theories besides potential ontological mystery become known that we should reject global response-dependence itself, that time has not yet come. Every view has its unintended consequences, and the mere possibility of provincial ontological mystery is worth absorbing at least for the present. Global response-dependence is too promising, and too new, a research program to be jettisoned right now.

The third and final reason why global response-dependence is worth retaining is that it still entails a mild, appealing form of realism. According to global
response-dependence, some of our terms do refer to extra-mental properties; Berkeleyan idealism continues to be skirted. Further, because our semantically basic terms refer to the properties that they do in virtue of the effects that those properties have on human beings (albeit *qua* members of particular communities), all terms are still linked to human responses. Pettit therefore continues to avoid problems associated with Platonic realism. Admittedly, in trying to maintain a connection between terms and human beings, Pettit does need to acknowledge the possibility that all human beings are disconnected from some parts of the world. But all human beings would remain connected to other parts of it too. There would be no separate ontology of properties *in toto*, merely the possibility of different parts of this ontology being separate and inaccessible from different people. Though this is not quite the result that Pettit wanted, it remains an improvement over idealism and Platonism both. While the possibility of provincial ontological mystery is unfortunate, it is not so unfortunate as to require Pettit to relinquish global response-dependence itself. Pettit should accept (ii) and reject (iii) as well as (i).

6. General Lessons

In this paper I have shown that Pettit faces a trilemma—he can accept realm ontological mystery, accept not knowing whether he is committed to provincial ontological mystery, or reject his global response-dependence theory altogether—and urged that he should chart the middle course. In this final section I take my focus off Pettit to consider general lessons that emerge from my analysis.

By my count there are five such lessons, which I can mention here only briefly. First, if Kant, Putnam, Kuhn, and Pettit are any indication, then global response-dependence theories all tend toward noumenalism. Kant and Kuhn themselves each admit the existence of things in themselves that underlie things as they appear to us (and so to which we can respond). Putnam’s own internal realism, recall, is a form of global response-dependence; and Putnam acknowledges that it might be impossible to avoid positing the existence of some way that the world really is that underlies our responses (1981: 61–2). Pettit is committed to noumenalism for reasons that we now know well.

Second, whatever noumenalism does arise from global response-dependence views can be construed ontologically or epistemically. In particular Langton’s interpretation of Kant’s noumenalism is applicable to other versions also. Thus the difference between things in themselves or realizer-properties in themselves, on the one hand, and things as they appear to us or realizer-properties in their effects, on the other, can be seen as encouraging humility rather than engendering mystery. Noumenalist views generally can therefore be regarded as benign.

Third, whatever theories link concepts and terms to anthropocentric responses, as Pettit’s global response-dependence theory does, are hard-pressed to resist sliding into ethnocentrism. Putnam recognizes the possibility of
ethnocentric differences between communities, while Kuhn made a career out of exploring consequences of these differences. Though Kant would resist such an ethnocentric slide, his views are anachronistic precisely because he claims that all human beings, at all times and in all places, must respond to the world in the same way. Pettit in particular, I have urged, cannot resist an ethnocentric slide himself.

The fourth lesson that emerges from my analysis combines the first three. Suppose that something like Pettit’s global response-dependence theory is true. Suppose too that noumenalism is construed epistemically. And suppose also that concepts and terms are ethnocentric. What follows? Members of different communities respond to either different properties or the same properties differently. And we can never determine which. Not only Pettit but anyone defending a global response-dependence view must accept that. But then any such defender faces the same trilemma. She can revert to construing noumenalism ontologically and be committed to realm ontological mystery. She can continue construing noumenalism epistemically and be unable to know whether she is committed to provincial ontological mystery. Or she can reject global response-dependence altogether.

Fifth and finally, though ontological mysteries are not ideal, possible provincial ontological mystery is not as worrisome as actual realm ontological mystery. And there are independent reasons not to reject global response-dependence itself just yet. Though the price of being a global response-dependence theorist is not knowing whether one is committed to provincial ontological mystery, that price is small enough to retain global response-dependence itself. That holds for Pettit’s own theory and for anyone else’s.16

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NOTES

1 At least this is true for all concepts of understanding. Excluded are concepts (or ideas) of theoretical reason, such as SOUL, GOD, and COSMOS, and practical reason, such as PERSON and RESPECT. (For discussion of how concepts of understanding and concepts of theoretical reason relate, see Goldberg 2004.)

2 See Allison 2004: 34.

3 Johnston 1989, who introduced the term ‘response-dependent’, maintains that evaluative concepts are response-dependent. McDowell compares aesthetic (2001, essay 6) and moral (essay 7) concepts to Locke’s color concepts, though unlike Johnston argues that there are disanalogies. Dennett 1989 identifies the concepts BELIEF and DESIRE with the concepts of states to which human beings can respond from the intentional stance by...
interpreting them as beliefs and desires, respectively. Menzies and Price 1993, and Woodward 2005, link the concept \textit{cause} to the concept of something to which human beings can respond by manipulating its effect. Further, I hope elsewhere to show that Davidson can be viewed as maintaining two \textit{mutually inconsistent} response-dependent treatments of the concept \textit{meaningful}: one, connecting it to the concept of a term that a radical interpreter can incorporate into a charitable, Tarski-style truth theory (2001); the other, connecting it to the concept of a term that a language learner learned in basic cases by triangulating its referent and in non-basic cases by appealing to terms learned in basic cases (2002). Of all of these only Johnston and McDowell call their views \textquote{response-dependent}'.

4 The possibility of noumenalism is what I have called \textquote{Kantian skepticism} (Goldberg and Rellihan forthcoming).

5 See Pettit 2005b: essay 5 for his account of normal conditions.

6 This resembles Davidson’s (2002) view mentioned in note 3.

7 Nonetheless see note 1. See Pettit 2005b: 50 for his claim that Putnam identifies Kant as a global response-dependence theorist. Pettit later (2005b: 90) draws connections between Kant’s and his own views.

8 Echoing Kant’s anthropocentrism, Putnam calls his own view \textquote{a human kind of realism} (1985: xviii, his emphasis). This human, or in Kant’s terms \textquote{empirical}, kind of realism is precisely the sort of mild realism to which Pettit subscribes. (Cf. Johnston 1991: 174, who calls Putnam’s view \textquote{global judgement-dependence}, which Johnston maintains names a species of global response-dependence.)


10 This is Johnston’s 1989, 1993 own view, which is why he eventually (1993) speaks of \textquote{response-dispositional} rather than \textquote{response-dependent}'.


12 Though, according to his editors, Kuhn ‘later repudiated (in conversation with us) that notion of a \textit{Ding an sich}’ (Conant and Haugeland 2002: 7), he never repudiated it in print, and his reasoning that his views entail noumenalism remains valid.


14 As Kuhn notes, the Ptolemaic takes planets to have geocentric orbits, while the Copernican takes them to have heliocentric ones. So one way in which their categorization of objects differs is that the Ptolemaic and Copernican categorize different objects as having geocentric orbits. See §§4–5.

15 See note 3 for a list of local response-dependence theorists. While Kuhn, Putnam, and Pettit are analytic philosophers who have explored global response-dependence, Pettit’s views have failed to gain much traction, while Kuhn’s and Putnam’s are sometimes dismissed as forms of antirealism. This is unfortunate. Though they are not forms of Platonic realism, they are forms of realism regardless.

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