INTRINSIC FINKS AND ATTRIBUTIONS OF RULE-FOLLOWING DISPOSITIONS

Kai-Yuan CHENG
National Chung-Cheng University (Taiwan)

Summary
Handfield and Bird (2008) claim that dispositionalists such as Martin and Heil (1998) appeal to antidotes and finks to explain why and how a conditional analysis of dispositions falls to Kripke’s (1982) criticisms, but fail. The main reason is that some antidotes and finks are unavoidably intrinsic and relatively permanent in an agent, in which case the ascription of a rule-following disposition to the agent is false. In this paper, I contend that the presence of intrinsic and relatively permanent finks or antidotes does not imply the absence of a rule-following disposition; some additional condition is needed for this implication to go through, but remains wanting. I end the paper with a discussion of where the real challenge lies for realist dispositionalism.

1. Introduction

The prospects of dispositionalist solutions to Kripke’s skeptical problems about rule-following have received much attention in recent literature. Martin and Heil (1998) have responded to Kripke’s (1982) skepticism by taking a realist dispositional position which they believe to be more plausible than a highly inadequate conditional analysis of dispositions assumed in Kripke’s refutation of dispositionalism. Handfield and Bird (2008) have recently argued that Martin and Heil fail to revive a dispositionalist solution, because a serious problem remains concerning the attribution of a rule-following disposition given the inescapable presence of intrinsic and relatively permanent finks or antidotes.

In this paper, I show that Handfield and Bird’s argument is flawed. I contend that the presence of intrinsic and relatively permanent finks and antidotes may, but need not, render the attribution of a rule-following disposition false. Despite this, Handfield and Bird’s discussion does embody an important insight regarding where a real challenge for a realistic dispositionalist lies. I shall point out, nonetheless, that their characterization of the challenge in question is limited
in some aspects, and the challenge in question is more demanding than the way they present it. Since Handfield and Bird’s main argument hinges on the error problem in rule-following, my discussion in what follows will focus on this problem.1

2. Kripke’s conditional analysis of dispositions vs. Martin and Heil’s realist view

As Kripke has noted (Kripke 1982, Chapter 2), the error problem for a dispositional account of rule-following derives from the fact that people could err when following a rule. An adder might answer ‘124’ to the question ‘68 + 57?’, in which case she makes a mistake. However, given a simple conditional analysis of dispositions,

(CA)  \[ S \text{ is disposed to yield manifestation } m \text{ in response to stimulus } s \text{ iff were } S \text{ to receive stimulus } s \text{ it would yield manifestation } m \]

the agent has to be attributed a disposition to follow some non-standard rule according to which ‘68 + 57 = 124’. In other words, dispositionalism makes no room for the possibility of error. Hence, it cannot be right.

Implicit in Kripke’s characterization of the error problem is a conditional conception of dispositions, which was traditionally held by philosophers such as Ryle (1949), Goodman (1954), Quine (1960), etc. However, such a conception has been seriously criticized by Johnston (1992), Martin (1994), Bird (1998), and others. Cases have been provided to show that a counterfactual conditional is neither necessary nor sufficient for a disposition ascription. For example, a fragile glass might not break when dropped, because it could be suitably wrapped.

1. The other two problems are the finitude and normativity problems. The former problem has to do with the difficulty of accommodating the fact that a person’s disposition seems to be finite while a followed rule seems to have an infinite number of instances. The later problem arises from the fact that a dispositional account of rule-following seems to be descriptive of what a person would perform in response to certain stimuli while following a rule seems to be a normative matter, involving what one ought to do in certain cases. Handfield and Bird (2008, 286) follow Martin and Heil to put the normativity problem aside, if the term “normativity” were construed as raising questions of justification, which would be surely controversial. If not construed in this way, the sense of normativity would appear to impose a similar constraint as the error problem does, requiring the line between correct and incorrect performances be drawn in a dispositional account of rule-following. The finitude problem, on the other hand, seems to be a problem which a dispositional account is tailor-made to solve, as Handfield and Bird notice (2008, 286–287): as Martin and Heil’s account has it, the possible manifestation of a disposition extends “indefinitely” (Martin & Heil 1998, 297).