PHILIP PETTIT

A THEORY OF NORMAL AND IDEAL CONDITIONS

INTRODUCTION

It is *a priori* on many accounts of colour concepts that something is red if and only if it is such that it would look red to normal observers in normal circumstances: it is such that it would look red, as we can say, under normal conditions of observation. And as this sort of formula is widely applied to colour concepts, so similar schemas are commonly defended in relation to a variety of other concepts too. Not only are colour concepts connected in such a fashion with human responses, so by many accounts are secondary quality concepts in general; aesthetic concepts, moral concepts and evaluative concepts of all kinds; modal concepts that serve to pick out the possible and the necessary; and so on.

The fashion for resorting to such formulas should not be surprising. Most of us suppose that whether a given, ostensively introduced term has a certain semantic value – whether, for example, it designates a certain property – ought to show up in people's tending to use it of things, and only of things, that apparently have that property. The obvious way of expressing this expectation is to require that the use of the ostensive term covary with the presence of the property in conditions that are normal in some sense for detecting that property. Thus there is *prima facie* reason to hold, and hold as an *a priori* matter, that for any ostensively introduced term, 'P', something is P if and only if it is such that it would seem P – people would be disposed to use 'P' to ascribe the corresponding property to it – under normal conditions of observation.

The schemas invoked under this motivation may vary in many different ways, of course. First, they may not connect the bare or simple reality of being P with a normalised human response, as

the biconditional for 'red' connects the reality of being red with seeming red. Rather what they connect with that response may be something more qualified: it may be the reality of being P, where it is stipulated that the people responding are capable of ostensively mastering a term that designates that property; where it is stipulated that the property is denominable in a term used among those subjects. Second, they may connect the reality of being P, or at least of being denominably P, with an idealised rather than a normalised response; where normal conditions are associated, roughly, with the lack of perturbing factors, ideal conditions are associated with a lack of limiting as well as perturbing factors: say, a lack of standard limitations on information and ability. And third, they may connect the reality of being P or of being denominably P with a normalised or idealised response that is rigidly tied to the actual world, or with a response that is tied only to whatever world, actual or counterfactual, is under consideration. And so on.

These remarks gesture at important complexities but happily I can abstract from most of them in this essay (but see Jackson and Pettit forthcoming; Pettit, 1991). My concern here is with the issue of how the notion of normal or ideal conditions is best analysed when it is used in the different sorts of *a priori* biconditionals that people are inclined to defend, whether on a narrow or a broad front. No one can be indifferent to this issue, since almost everyone makes some such use of the notion of normal or ideal conditions. And yet, surprisingly, few ever bother to say anything extended on the topic. As the notion is one of the most frequently invoked ideas in philosophical theory, so it is one of the least frequently analysed.

My essay is in three main sections. In the first, I set out some more or less obvious desiderata on a theory of normal and ideal conditions: on a theory, as I will say for short, of favourable conditions. In the second, I present my theory of how favourable conditions are to be identified; this develops an account presented in earlier work (Pettit, 1990a; Pettit, 1991b; Pettit, 1996). And then in the final section I show how this account satisfies the desiderata outlined earlier.

Two caveats before proceeding. The favourable conditions that interest me are those conditions that are favourable for the detection of how things are: those conditions that serve to connect what is

with what seems and what seems with what is. Such favourable-for-detection conditions are a species of what we may think of as favourable-for-functioning conditions, so far as detecting things is a mode of functioning. But what I say here is meant to bear only on the specific category. The constraints on how to analyse favourable-for-detection conditions are particularly demanding, as we shall see, and my concern is to identify a theory of such conditions that can satisfy the constraints.

The second caveat is that the conditions that interest me are favourable-for-detection in a serious and literal sense of 'detection'. In particular, they are not like the conventionally identified conditions that we treat as favourable for authoritative stipulation. Certain conditions are required for a referee's decision to be authoritative in regard to whether a move in a game is a score or for whether a parliament's passing a bill makes it into a statutory law. But those are not the sorts of conditions that will concern us here. They are not conditions that are favourable for detection on the part of referee or parliament, in any serious sense of detection. They reflect conventions of social life, not conditions designed to facilitate discovery in conventionally independent realms.

1. DESIDERATA ON ANY ACCOUNT OF FAVOURABLE CONDITIONS

When we say that something is P or is denominably P if and only if it is such that it would seem to be P in favourable conditions, we presumably mean to communicate a message of substance, not just a bland tautology. The first desideratum on an analysis of 'favourable', then, is that it should not make vacuous the biconditional in which it serves. In particular, it should not define favourable conditions as those conditions, whatever they are, that would make the biconditional true: those conditions that would ensure that what is P is revealed in what seems P and what seems P reflects what is P. It should avoid any such whatever-it-takes line of elucidation (Johnston, 1989; Wright, 1988). The account should give us an independent grasp on what makes conditions favourable, so that we offer intuitively substantive information – albeit information that is *a priori* derivable – when we say that something is P, or is denom-

inably P, just in case it is such that it would seem P in favourable conditions.

One obvious alternative to specifying favourable conditions in a whatever-it-takes and therefore vacuous fashion, would be to characterise them by reference to a finite list. Favourable conditions, we might be told, are characterised by the absence of factors x and y and z. But such an approach would offend against a second, intuitive desideratum on any account of such conditions. This is a non-closure as distinct from a non-vacuity desideratum. It says that however favourable conditions are to be analysed, they should constitute an open-ended category; they should not be exhausted by a closed list. Wherever we have a use for the notion of conditions that are favourable for detecting something, the conditions currently identified as favourable must be taken to exemplify, not necessarily exhaust, the category in question. We think of the conditions in such a way that it makes sense to talk of discovering – discovering, not deciding – that apart from requiring the absence of x, y and z, they also require the absence of w.

These first two desiderata suggest that in specifying favourable conditions for any realm of concepts, we need to go for an open-list mode of presentation: the conditions must be made salient either by examples of such conditions, or by examples of the unfavourable factors that must be absent in such conditions, where the examples are meant to direct us to a kind that outstrips the examples themselves. That open-list approach, however, may run into problems with a further desideratum that we must also keep in view. This is that the analysis must make clear why it is *a priori*, as it is under the approaches envisaged here, that favourable conditions are such as to ensure that what is P – or what is denominably P – will seem P and that what seems P will be P. On the face of it, we may find difficulty in seeing how a kind of conditions that is made inductively salient from certain examples could present itself as connected in an *a priori* way with this guarantee that the is-seems gap is closed.

The three desiderata considered so far represent structural constraints on an account of favourable conditions such that it is easy to see how any two can be satisfied but hard to see how the three can be simultaneously met. Let favourable conditions be specifiable in a vacuous manner – as on a whatever-it-takes approach – and

there will be no problem about how they are open-ended and yet *a priori* connected with the closure of the is-seems gap. Let the conditions amount to no more than a closed set – as on the approach that offers a finite inventory of favourable conditions – and equally there will be no problem in recognising that they are not vacuously defined and yet that they satisfy the *a priori* connection: what is P can be stipulatively defined, in the manner of a conventional property, as what seems to be P in those particular conditions. And let the conditions be connected only in an empirical, *a posteriori* way with the closure of the is-seems gap – as, for example, on an account of favourable conditions as those that prevail statistically – and we can readily see how the other constraints may be met: what holds only empirically will hold non-vacuously and it may well hold in relation to an open-ended kind of conditions.

But the desiderata on an account of favourable conditions are not reducible just to these structural constraints. There are also three epistemic constraints that any theory should satisfy. These are constraints that derive from the character of what is typically known by practitioners of those concepts for which we offer *a priori* biconditionals. We must be careful to ensure that our analysis of favourable conditions does not suppose that practitioner knowledge is any richer, or indeed any poorer, than our intuitions tell us it may be. And if we are to ensure this, then we must make sure that the analysis meets three epistemic constraints.

The first epistemic constraint is that favourable conditions – normal and ideal conditions – should be defined in a way that leaves open the possibility that practitioners have no word, and in that sense no concept, for favourable conditions. Even if some sort of *a priori* biconditional governs our concept of redness, it is clear that ordinary people may be perfectly competent in their use of the word 'red', and may be perfectly good judges of redness, without themselves having any general word available for the kind of conditions that we describe as 'favourable' or as 'normal' or 'ideal'. Any plausible analysis of favourable conditions must be consistent with this lack of articulation.

Independently of empirical plausibility, however, it is important to register that people may be inarticulate in this way. Suppose that people have a word for conditions that are favourable for the detec-

tion of a property, P. In that case it is natural also to suppose that when they try to ascertain that conditions are indeed favourable in the articulated sense – when they seek to form a judgment on the matter – they will rely on conditions that are favourable for the identification of those very conditions. But this regress threatens to be infinite, if at every stage people are required to have a word and concept for the favourable conditions on which they rely. Thus in postulating that people may have no word or concept for those conditions that are favourable for the detection of a certain property, or whatever – in postulating that this issue may not be within the domain of accessible judgment – we block the threat of regress.

The second epistemic constraint cuts the other way from the first. Although practitioners may be ignorant to the point of lacking a word like 'favourable' or 'unfavourable', they are bound to be insightful in a complementary manner about those conditions that we theorists describe as favourable or about those factors that we describe as unfavourable. If they recognise an unfavourable factor at work in the shaping of how things seem, for example, then even though they may not have the word 'unfavourable' at their disposal, the presence of that kind of factor must tend to register with them, in particular register with them as normatively significant. They must be disposed to see the factor as a reason for denying credibility to how things seem and for suspending or withdrawing judgment as to how things are. If they did not have this normative sensitivity to such factors, then we theorists would have little reason for taking the factors to be unfavourable. Thus any analysis of favourable conditions must make clear how such sources of unfavourability can register in a normative way with the practitioners in question. It will not do for the analysis to identify the factors, say, as being of type T, where it is unclear why examples of that type should register with practitioners and make a normative impact on their minds.

The third and last epistemic constraint requires the analysis to be consistent, not with inarticulacy, and not with normativity, but with fallibility. The fact is that with the concepts for which biconditionals are provided by philosophers we all acknowledge that people are fallible in their application. Even if favourable conditions guarantee that the is-seems gap is closed, then, the analysis of those conditions should make it clear that no conditions that practitioners ever

find themselves self-evidently in are guaranteed to be favourable. If some such conditions were guaranteed to be favourable, then the fallibility of practitioners would be severely compromised: the fact of knowing that they were in the conditions in question – and this, we presume, is a matter of self-evidence – would guarantee that as things seem, so they are, and that as they are, so they seem.

We may sum up the desiderata that we have surveyed in the following list of constraints.

Structural Constraints
  1. Non-vacuity
  2. Non-closure
  3. *A priori* connection

Epistemic Constraints
  1. Consistency with inarticulacy
  2. Consistency with normativity
  3. Consistency with fallibility

I turn in the next section to the task of presenting a positive account of favourable conditions. We will return to these constraints in the final section, when we look at how far that theory succeeds in meeting them.

2. AN ACCOUNT OF FAVOURABLE CONDITIONS

Towards a Functionalist Model

The structural constraints put any account of favourable conditions under pressure from two opposed sides. If the account is to satisfy non-vacuity and non-closure, on the one hand, then it had better let the world determine, and determine in an open-ended way, what conditions are favourable, what not. But if it is to satisfy the *a priori* connection with removing the is-seems gaps, on the other, then it had better let people's practices also have a say in determining why certain conditions count as favourable, others not. It is only if people's practices are relevant to determining what conditions are favourable for P-detection – as well as to whether something

is to count as deserving the name 'P' – that reflection on the practices can suffice, independently of empirical evidence, to show that favourable conditions remove the is-seems gap.

How should we set up a dual connection with the world, on the one hand, and with human practices, on the other, in an account of favourable conditions? The obvious model to explore is a functionalist one. This would have human practices determine the role or function that any conditions that are to count as favourable must fulfill, in the way that analytical functionalists say our practices determine the role – in this case, the causal role – that any state that is to count as a belief or a desire or a pain must fulfill. But while connecting favourable conditions in that way with human practices, the functionalist model would also leave a place for the world to make an impact. For the world would determine what actual conditions serve to realise or play the role; it would take the role as given by people's practices and it would determine what, if anything, serves in that role.

We can see, in principle, why such a functionalist model might enable us to give a place both to people's practices and to the world that they inhabit in determining favourable conditions. The challenge now, however, is to tell a plausible story that would give substance to such a model of things. I offer a candidate story in this section and then I try to show in the next that it gives us an analysis of favourable conditions that can meet both the structural and epistemic constraints on such an analysis.

The 'Ethocentric' Story

The story bears on how it is that we come to master and employ certain terms and concepts that are introduced to us, perhaps in packages, on at least the partial basis of experience: on the basis, not of explicit or implicit definition in other terms, but of exposure to examples.

There are three main elements to the story. The first postulates a ground-level disposition or habit that leads people, on exposure to certain examples, to extrapolate spontaneously in a given direction, taking the examples as instances of a kind foreshadowed in that extrapolation, and to use the term that the examples introduce to designate the foreshadowed kind. The second postulates a

higher-order disposition or habit that prompts people to withhold significance from the working of the first disposition in cases where it leads them at one time in a different direction from where it had led them previously or where it leads them in a different direction from where it leads others. And the third postulates a practice of searching out factors that may explain this discrepancy, consistently with all parties using the term to designate the same kind: searching out factors, ideally, that will lead them to agree on discounting all but one of the discrepant responses. I describe the story as 'ethocentric', on the grounds that the classical Greek word 'ethos' can stand loosely for the sort of habit and practice to which the story gives prominence (see Pettit, 1991, 1996, p. 83).

The first element is easily illustrated. Consider how we are each capable of being directed to a certain property – and therefore to the semantic value that is to attach to a corresponding term – by means of a finite list of examples. It is a familiar observation, popularised by Wittgenstein, that any finite list of examples is consistent with an indefinite number of patterns or rules: they can be extrapolated in any of an indefinite number of directions. But while that is certainly the case in principle, in practice we are usually quite easily prompted to go in one broad direction and indeed in the same broad direction as others.

Present children with examples of the colour red, using the word 'red' of them, and they will quickly cotton on to the kind that is supposed to be salient and will use the word 'red' to signal a belief that something belongs to this kind. And what is true of 'red' is not unusual. It is true of other natural predicates like 'smooth' and 'loud', 'straight' and 'regular', as well as of words for more culturally marked properties like 'funny' or 'game' or 'box'. In an open variety of cases, it is clear that we learn to master words on the basis of spontaneous inclinations to ignore the logical fact that any set of examples instantiates an infinity of patterns and to extrapolate in more or less determinate, and indeed convergent, directions. The extrapolative disposition is almost certainly underwritten by biologically programmed sensitivities – these patterns are salient, those are not – but it may also be subject, of course, to culturally induced shaping and prompting. Happily, we do not have to develop views on those matters. Our story only requires us to register the plausible

claim that whatever their source, we are equipped in many areas with spontaneous extrapolative dispositions that facilitate our mastery of certain semantically basic words.

The second element in the story postulates a higher-order disposition generally to inhibit this first spontaneous disposition – to deny it authority in guiding our judgment about a certain new case – when there is a presumptive discrepancy across time or people in where it leads. The disposition leads me now to say that something is red or regular or a game where previously it led me to say something different: and this, even though I have no reason to think that the thing has changed. Or the disposition leads me to say that something is red or regular or a game where the corresponding disposition in others – the disposition in others whom I take to use the same word to express the same belief – does not lead them to do this.

My story records, plausibly, that in face of such discrepancy most of us hesitate to use the word 'red' or 'regular' or 'game' of the item in question – we hesitate to use it as an expression of a corresponding belief – and are inclined to leave the matter open: to suspend judgment. We assume, subject to the possibility of revision, that the word has the same semantic value in our mouth at different times and in the mouths of different people. And we assume that all sides have a certain basic competence in judging whether the term applies in a given case. Thus we refuse to invest our spontaneous disposition at any moment, or even our personal disposition over time, with such authority that we are unconcerned about the discrepancy. We authorise ourselves at previous times, and we authorise other people, to the extent of leaving it an open possibility that they are right and we are wrong: whatever we are spontaneously inclined to say and judge, the item in question may not after all be red, or regular, or a game.

The third element in the ethocentric story goes on to describe what we are allegedly inclined to do when the inhibiting disposition cuts in and we are left in a state of suspended judgment. The claim is that, assuming the term has the same semantic value on all sides, we look for an explanation of the discrepancy. Ideally, we look for an explanation of the discrepancy that we can all accept and that can lead us, so far as we accept it, to a resolution of the discrepancy: we

can discount all but one of the discrepant responses and we can take it as a guide to how things are.

It is not surprising that we look for an explanation of such discrepancy. Given the assumption that the term has constant semantic value across the discrepant sides and that it is introduced ostensively, say to designate a property that is allegedly salient from examples, we could not comfortably treat the discrepancy as inexplicable. The constancy of the semantic value means that we have to think of one and the same property – or the absence of that property – as registering with one side and not with the other. And the ostensive salience of the property means that we have to think that the side with which it registers is subject to suitable causal contact with that property. How then to countenance the failure on the other side? Consistently with the assumption given, the only way would seem to be by positing the influence of a factor that affects the enjoyment of a similar causal contact and that thereby explains the discrepancy.

In the ideal explanation of discrepancy we all explain the divergence in the same way and this explanation allows us to agree on what is indeed the case. It directs us to the response where causal contact with the property is unaffected. Or, appealing to the vagueness of the term in explaining the discrepancy, it suggests that no response can be regarded as uniquely right. The vagueness case is familiar and the first case is readily illustrated.

Think of the way we come into line with one another in the earlier stages of language learning, and in learning about the world. We register that no, our skin does not change colour when we look at it under sodium light; that yes, there is as much water in the small, squat glass as in the tall, thin one; that no, the surface we touch after immersing our hand in hot water is not any colder than it was previously; that yes, the stick in the water is straight, despite appearances; that no, our favoured team was not any more law-abiding than the opposition; and so on. More generally, we register that how things seem is not always how they are and that how they are does not always show up in how they seem. We come to learn that our seemings are to be trusted only when they are not affected by the sorts of factors that make for differences between people and, with the same person, between times.

The ideal resolutional explanation of difference is not restricted, however, to exchanges in which one party is clearly a learner. Thus we invite one another, in determining the originality of a painting or building or piece of music, to look at it without such and such preconceptions; to put aside sectional attachments in asking whether this or that arrangement is fair; to look at the long-term pattern, and not just at current protestations, in judging whether such and such a person is sincere; to step back from seductive metaphors and pictures in determining if time can really be said to flow; and so on for a variety of particular cases. And we engage indirectly in similar invitations when we challenge one another to avoid this or that alleged inconsistency in the things we claim; or to consider fully the implications – the actual and possible implications – of defending such and such a general view about some matter: the implications of taking justice or personhood or causality, for example, to be fully characterised by means of such and such a formula.

What sorts of factors are actually identified in people's practices as reasons to discount the extrapolations and verdicts which they affect? Some are represented as perturbing or warping or distorting influences on the judgmental inclinations of the subject. Some are seen as limitations of information or access or ability that constrain or miscue the representation that underlies the person's judgments. Perturbing influences are illustrated by the coloured glasses that affect vision, or the partiality that impacts on evaluative judgment, or the ingrained habits of thought that are liable to block any inno-vative judgment. Limiting influences are exemplified by the lack of information that may impact on a judgment of probability or the lack of computational or conceptual ability that may explain and undermine someone's mathematical assessments.

In the ideal, resolutional explanation of discrepancy we all accept the same explanation of the difference and that explanation enables us to resolve the disagreement. The availability of such explanations in at least some cases is essential to our being able to think of the term in question as having the same ostensively salient property – or whatever – as its semantic value across different times and people. Suppose that we never achieved such resolutions of difference. Why would we remain committed in that case to the view that the term has the same semantic value across the discrepant sides? It would

surely be more plausible to think that its meaning varies as between those who use it differently.

But notwithstanding the importance of being able to achieve the ideal resolution of difference in some cases, the explanation of discrepancy on which we settle is often not ideal in this sense. It may be that we each explain the discrepancy in different ways and that we each therefore stick with the verdict that goes with our own response. I think of you as befuddled, you think of me as uninformed, and so on. Or it may be that while we each agree that the discrepancy is due to something like different background beliefs, this common explanation does not support a resolution of the difference. We each see that it is the difference in background religious beliefs, for example, that leads me to see something as just, you as unjust, but this does not incline either of us to change our minds.

I am going to assume that the ethocentric story sketched holds for at least many of the terms and concepts that we deploy in ordinary life. What I now wish to show is that that story enables us to give an account of favourable conditions that conforms, broadly, to the functionalist model described at the beginning of this section. The story directs us to a role, fixed by people's practices, that any conditions have to satisfy if they are to count as favourable. And of course it allows that which conditions, if any, play that role is determined by the nature of the world.

The Functionalist Model Implemented

The characterisation of the role emerges as follows. According to the ethocentric story, people regularly invoke certain factors in a resolutional way as reasons to discount a given extrapolation and verdict. To the extent that they invoke the factors to this effect, they treat them as factors that are unfavourable for the extrapolation and judgment in question. But if people's practices identify a category of unfavourable factors in this manner, then we can say that favourable conditions of judgment are those that are not affected by any unfavourable factor: that is, by any factor that people's practices would make it right to regard as unfavourable.

This account does not identify unfavourable factors with those that people happen to treat as unfavourable and it does not equate

favourable conditions with those that people happen to regard as favourable. It is not conventionalist in character. Rather it assumes that people's practices make it right to regard certain factors as unfavourable, certain conditions as favourable, and it identifies those factors and conditions on the basis of that assumption; it identifies them in such a way that people may be mistaken about what factors are unfavourable, what conditions favourable.

This is legitimate under the ethocentric story. According to that story, people assume that there are properties and other entities available for relevant, ostensively introduced terms to designate and that these entities register with them by giving them certain extrapolative dispositions: cottoning on to what 'red' or 'regular' or 'game' designates, learners are more or less compelled to treat some new cases as similar, others as dissimilar. But people do not take it, under the ethnocentric story, that their extrapolative inclination at any time is a sure index of whether the property is present or not. Authorising past selves and other persons, they baulk in the face of discrepancy – or at least discrepancy with those who share relevant background beliefs – allowing it to raise a question about their own current inclination. They invest their extrapolative dispositions with confidence, so it transpires, only so far as they find evidence that those with whom they differ have opposed background beliefs or are subject to some perturbance or limitation that disturbs their capacity to detect the property in question.

What factors, then, do people's practices make it right for them to treat as unfavourable; and, relatedly, what conditions do they make it right for them to treat as favourable? Suppose, as their practices commit people to supposing, that there is a property or other entity there for a term like 'red' or 'regular' to designate, and that people are reliable detectors of that property in the absence, and only in the absence of certain perturbing or limiting factors. The answer, then, is straightforward. Unfavourable factors will be those factors such that if people were to identify them as perturbances and limitations that undermine detection, then that would maximise expected, long-term convergence among individuals in the use of 'red' or 'regular': specifically, in the use of 'red' or 'regular' to ascribe the property it currently ascribes. Or at least it would maximise such convergence

among individuals who are not separated by relevant differences in background belief.

A little reflection shows why this answer is straightforward. Suppose there is a factor relevant in the perception of redness such that if people treated this as unfavourable and discounted responses that it influenced, then that would increase convergence on the property that they think of as answering to the word 'red'. In that case, there is salient reason for thinking that whatever their actual practice, people ought to identify the factor as a perturbation or limitation that affects the perception of redness. Or suppose there is a factor that people treat as unfavourable for the perception of redness such that its identification as unfavourable does not increase convergence on questions of what is red, what not; it has no effect on such convergence or it actually reduces the level of convergence available. In that case there is equally salient reason for thinking that despite their actual practice, people ought not to identify the factor as a perturbation or limitation that affects the perception of redness. Under the practices described in the ethocentric story, unfavourable factors are those whose identification as unfavourable would maximise expected, long-term agreement about the judgments at issue among relevant individuals.

This makes clear, then, how certain conditions will count as favourable so far as they play a certain role that is identified in people's practices. The role that they play is inferential in character. Favourable conditions are conditions such that, under people's practices, they support an inference to the conclusion that as things seem so they are, and as they are so they seem. But I began this section by arguing that any plausible account of favourable conditions must leave a place for the world as well as a place for the practices of people in responding to that world. And it should be clear that our account meets this demand as well. For the nature of the world, as revealed in empirical inquiry, will determine whether there are conditions available to realise the ethocentric role and, if so, what those conditions are.

Our talk of colours or values or whatever is premissed, according to the ethocentric story, on the assumption that there are common properties there that may be expected to register with us in the absence of certain influences. But it may be that we live in a world

inhospitable to our presumptions and that there are no identifiable, favourable conditions such that under those conditions a certain property would register in common with us. It may be that the world we inhabit is such that our talk about colour or value is entirely misconceived; it is founded in error. Perhaps up to now we have gotten on fairly well talking about what is red and blue, right and wrong, and assuming that there is some background factor available to explain away any divergence. Under further examination of what the world has to offer, however, we may discover that this is all an illusion.

But suppose that the world is not so inhospitable and that there are indeed such properties and such conditions available. In that case too, the world will retain a salient presence. For it is only in empirical investigation of the world that we will be able to determine which factors are rightly regarded as unfavourable, which conditions as favourable. It is a matter of discovery rather than decision that colour does not show up reliably under sodium lighting or, assuming that value goes like colour, that no one is a reliable judge in their own case. And as past experience of the world has led us to recognise such unfavourable factors, it is very likely that continuing inquiry will point us to further discoveries of the same kind. The world may yet hold many surprises for us as we try to identify factors that impact unfavourably on perception and to discern favourable and unfavourable conditions.

This completes my account of how a broadly functionalist account of favourable conditions – specifically, an ethnocentric account – can be true. I turn in the next section to the question of whether the account at which we have arrived is capable of satisfying the structural and epistemic desiderata identified in the first section. I shall argue that it does.

3. ASSESSING THE ACCOUNT BY THE DESIDERATA

Structural Constraints

The most salient of the structural constraints is the third requirement, that there must be an *a priori* connection between something's being P, or at least being denominably P, and its being such that it would seem P in favourable conditions. So does the account

offered here manage to satisfy this constraint? Does it ensure the *a priori* status of the claim that something is denominably P, to take the weaker case, if and only if it would seem P in favourable conditions? Is it consistent with the account given that something could be denominably P and not satisfy the right hand side of the biconditional or not be denominably P and satisfy it?

Suppose that something is denominably P. It has the property, P, and that property is one which people have succeeded in naming: they are masters of a term that designates it. What guarantees that the property is denominable, under the ethocentric story? What ensures that the term 'P', as used by people, designates that property and no other? The fact that P is the property, and indeed the only property, whose presence in something registers with people under favourable conditions.[1] But that means that if something is denominably P, then it has the property that registers in that way: it has the property that would make it seem P under favourable conditions. And it means, furthermore, that only if something is denominably P will it be such as to seem P under such conditions. For were certain things that are not P to seem P under such conditions, then the term 'P' would not be particularly connected with the P-property: it would be associated with a property common also to those non-P things; hence something can be such as to seem P under such conditions only if it is denominably P.

These claims show that the linkage between being P and seeming P is *a priori*, as the third constraint insists that it must be (see Stalnaker, 1978 on the *a priori*). The mere denominability of P ensures that it is *a priori* that something is P if and only if it would seem P in favourable conditions.[2] But the claims may cause some hesitation. For someone may say that surely it is possible for something to seem P, and for the conditions for P-detection to be favourable, and yet it is not be P; and for something to be P, even to be denominably P,and yet not seem P. They may maintain that if we are realists about the property of P-ness, and if we are fallibilists about our capacity for attaining knowledge, then we must admit the possibility of epistemology and ontology coming apart, even in the most favourable conditions for detecting P: we must admit the possibility of something's seeming P without being P or of its being P, even denominably P, without seeming P.

This hesitation is ungrounded. Consistently with being realists about the property designated as 'P', and consistently with thinking of ourselves, individually and collectively, as fallible explorers of the objective world where the property is distributed, we may still take the view that I have been pressing. For the main point urged under that approach is that which objective property shall be the property that attracts the word 'P', as we use it, is determined by which property has the effect of seeming P to us, at least in those conditions which our practices of resolving discrepancy give us no reason to discount. There is no compromise of realism or fallibilism in allowing that being P is tied to seeming P under those conditions that count as favourable. That connection comes about simply because the semantic issue of which property 'P' picks out is fixed on the assumption that the property will register systemically with us, at least when perturbations and limitations are put aside. We can recognise the tie between being P and seeming P without thinking in a non-realist way about the nature of P-ness and without thinking in a non-fallibilist way about the nature of P-detection.

Let us grant that the ethnocentric account of favourable conditions satisfies the third structural constraint. How does it fare with regard to the other two: the constraints of non-vacuity and non-closure? There is no problem with non-closure, since it is quite consistent with the ethocentric identification of favourable conditions that they constitute an open-ended kind; the conditions that play the role of being favourable for P-detection are not necessarily exhausted by any finite list. But what about non-vacuity? Does the account characterise favourable conditions in such a way that the biconditional is not vacuous: in particular, not vacuous in the manner associated with the whatever-it-takes approach?

There is a loose sense in which any *a priori* claim is vacuous: it says something that is not open to empirical falsification and so it says something that has no empirical message to convey. But the sense in which the whatever-it-takes approach makes a relevant biconditional vacuous is much stricter than this. Under that approach the biconditional for 'P' says the following: something is P if and only if it is such that it would seem P in conditions where seeming P and being P do not come apart. The trouble here is not just that the connection between being P and seeming P in

such conditions is empirically unfalsifiable. It is that the connection is entirely uninteresting. The conception of something that is P is barely distinguishable from the conception of something that is such as to seem P in circumstances where seeming P is nothing more or less than being P.

In this strict sense of vacuity, it should be clear that relevant biconditionals are not vacuous under the ethnocentric approach. Certainly there is an *a priori* connection, as I see things, between being denominably P and seeming P in conditions which people's practices in using 'P' give them no reason to discount. But though it is allowed to be *a priori*, the connection is interesting, even surprising.

It takes considerable reflection to see the case in favour of the *a priori* biconditional. What it requires, in effect, is acceptance of a certain theory of how the relevant terms come to be semantically attached to corresponding properties or other entities. The theory says that a terms like 'P' gets to designate a certain property just so far as people are disposed to use it to ascribe the property – just so far as things seem to be P to them – in those conditions, and only in those conditions, that their practices give them no reason to fault as conditions for P-detection. But if it takes reflection to find the *a priori* biconditional compelling in such a case, then the biconditional itself cannot be vacuous. In particular, it cannot be vacuous in the sense in which it becomes vacuous under the whatever-it-takes approach.

Epistemic Constraints

The first epistemic constraint on an account of favourable conditions is that ordinary folk should not be required under the account, to have in their own vocabulary any cognate for the word 'favourable'; they may have such a word, of course, but it should not be implied by the account that they have one. This constraint is quite clearly satisfied by our theory. For while ordinary people do come to treat certain factors as unfavourable, this mode of treatment does not require them to have any single word for the items that they take to warrant such treatment. Treating a factor as unfavourable simply means, first, being disposed to let the observation that it is present inhibit an inference from appearance to reality or from reality to

appearance and, second, being disposed to quote and recognise its presence as a reason for not endorsing such an inference.

People will have to be able to make comments, of course, to the effect that the factor undermined the credibility of the appearance, and so on. But they can do this without having access to any single word like 'unfavourable' or 'abnormal' or 'nonideal' or whatever. They may say in one example that the sodium lighting failed to bring out the natural colour, making the point obvious by experiment. They may say in another that the immersion in water distorted the look of the stick, again illustrating the point by demonstration. They may say in yet another that someone's partiality made them misread the demands of fairness, contrasting the judgment with what we would say from as impartial perspective. And they may do all of this without having an umbrella term like 'unfavourable' or 'favourable' at their disposal.

The second epistemic constraint is that though an account of favourable conditions must not require people to have such a word, it must explain why favourable conditions, taken one by one, are registered in such a light that people accord normative significance to them. They take it, for example, that what seems to be so in presumptively favourable conditions is so and ought to be judged to be so. If they think that a seeming or appearance is affected by an unfavourable factor then, no matter how they describe that factor, this presents itself as a reason why they should not trust that appearance. And if they lack such a thought, then they are happy to go along with appearances and take them as indicative of reality.

Does our account explain why people take the presence of an unfavourable factor, however described, as a reason for not trusting appearances? Yes, it does. In learning a term like the 'P' that we have been invoking throughout, people commit themselves to calling all Ps, and certainly only Ps, by the name of 'P'; that is involved in the very project of knowledge-seeking. And in authorising their interlocutors, people take it that what makes something a P should show up, barring special explanation, in the interlocutor's perspective as well as in their own. Given in a case of genuine discrepancy that they or their interlocutor does not register P in some instance of the property – or registers it in some non-instance – they look for a special explanation. And when they find it – when they find an

unfavourable influence at work on one or the other side – then their original commitment to calling all and only P's by the name of 'P' commits them to discounting how things seem at the location where the influence is operative.

There may be nothing about a particular unfavourable factor, taken in itself, why its presence should provide people with a reason for not trusting the appearances. The nature of sodium lighting, as such, does not provide a license for discounting the colours that things display. It is the way that unfavourable factors are identified as explaining discrepancies – in particular, explaining discrepancies within the context of the standard assumptions rehearsed in our ethocentric story – that explains why they have a normative status for ordinary people. Thus there is no mystery in this claim about the normative significance of unfavourable factors.

The third epistemic constraint on any account of favourable conditions takes us back to issues about fallibility. It is that the account should not compromise the fallibility of ordinary people in making relevant judgments. We know that the account is consistent with the possibility that nothing answers to the role of seeming to be P in favourable conditions; the world may let us down in not, despite appearances, providing any realiser for the role. But even if there is a realiser for the role, people should remain fallible, under our account, as to whether the realiser is present in any instance. However favourable conditions for P-detection are identified, it should not be possible for people to be more certain that they are fulfilled in relation to a certain appearance of P than it is generally possible for them to be certain that P is present. It would raise serious questions about an account if just by learning that account people could use the biconditional for P to give them a more certain basis than they ever had before for judging that something is or is not P. Favourable conditions should be just as epistemologically elusive as facts about the presence and absence of the entity for whose detection they are supposed to be favourable.

This constraint would raise problems for any account that canonically identified unfavourable factors by some decidable formula. All that we would have to do in order to check whether something that seems P is P is to use the formula to decide whether any unfavourable factors are present. But the formula whereby unfavourable

factors are identified under the ethocentric approach is not decidable in that way. Unfavourable factors are those such that their identific- ation as unfavourable would maximise expected agreement about the presence of P among individuals who are not separated by any relevant background beliefs. But we can never be in a position to tell for sure that such factors are absent. For what is unfavourable in this sense may not appear to be unfavourable; what is unfavourable may only become apparent in the light of further discrepancies and resolutions of discrepancy.

I maintain then, that just as the ethocentric account can satisfy the structural constraints on a satisfactory theory of favourable condi- tions, so too it can satisfy the epistemic constraints. It does not demand a sophisticated vocabulary and conceptualisation among ordinary individuals, it explains why favourable conditions can have normative significance for them, and it does not compromise the degree of fallibility that they display.

One final point about the epistemic plausibility of the account is also worth noting. This is that as the story goes, the mastery of terms starts with a positive presumption in favour of the way individuals are disposed to extrapolate or, equivalently, in favour of the way things seem to them. Appearances are taken at face value, according to the account, and it is only in the exceptional event of discrepancy that questions arise as to whether there is some unfavourable factor at work. This means that people will naturally trust appearances so far as they lack the belief that they are subject to an unfavourable influence. They will not have to form the self-affirming belief that they are not subject to such influences; it is enough that they lack the self-critical belief that they are subject to them. This result fits with the phenomenology of how we treat appearances and provides a further reason for endorsing the ethocentric account.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted in this essay to provide a satisfactory account of the sense in which it is possible to invoke favourable conditions in biconditionals of the form that most philosophers countenance for some concepts. But philosophers differ greatly in how far they think that such biconditionals are relevant. Some think that they

apply, at most, with secondary-quality concepts that bear on how things look and feel and sound and taste and smell. Others think, as I do, that they are relevant to all terms and concepts that are semantically basic, being introduced, individually or in groups, on the basis of ostension (see Pettit, 1990, 1991, 1996; Jackson and Pettit, forthcoming).

What I would like to observe, in conclusion, is that the account of favourable conditions offered here may help to show that there is nothing very surprising about the sort of position that attracts me. There is no suggestion, under the account offered, that the terms and concepts for which biconditionals are relevant are employed on the basis of an introspective sense of how things seem: seemings elicit judgments quite spontaneously, being questioned only in exceptional cases. There is no suggestion that the terms and concepts represent the properties and other entities designated in a relational way, as properties that produce the relevant seemings: a property may be identified in virtue of the seemings it produces in favourable circumstances without being identified as the property that produces those seemings. And there is no suggestion, finally, that the properties or other entities designated have no causal impact in the world other than that of producing the relevant seemings: if the property of being hard makes thing seem hard, it does so because it serves more broadly to guard any ordinary, middle-sized bearer against penetration by other such things.

The account offered here is part of the broader picture that I defend and I hope that it may lend some plausibility to that picture. It shows how that picture can be developed without commitment to any counter-intuitive consequences. It shows how it can give plausible form to the thought that if a semantically basic term designates something then it ought to be systematically correlated with it, at least in favourable circumstances. But I make the point in the way of a secondary wish. My primary concern has been to argue that the account is indeed satisfactory and that it ought to recommend itself to anyone who thinks that there is a relevant use for the notion of normal or ideal conditions.[3]

NOTES

[1] There is an ambiguity here which I shall leave unresolved in the present context. The property might be the instantiated property, assuming there is one, that would register with people in favourable conditions. Or it might be the idealised property that would register with people in favourable conditions: the property that would be realised under favourable conditions but that may not be instantiated in the world under discussion. For more on this distinction see Jackson and Pettit (forthcoming) and Pettit (1998).

[2] With many properties we may feel that a stronger *a priori* connection is compelling. Perhaps we naturally limit ourselves to saying that something is denominably hard or flat if and only if it would seem hard or flat in favourable conditions. But we spontaneously say that something is red or funny if and only if it would seem red or funny in favourable conditions; we do not feel the need to enter a qualification about denominability. My conjecture is that the difference derives from something special about properties such as the coloured and the comic. This is that they do little more in the world than make things seem coloured and seem comic, whereas a property like being hard or being flat does a lot more: it affects how an object impacts, not just on us human beings, but on other bodies too (see Jackson and Pettit, forthcoming).

[3] My thanks to Jakob Hohwy, Frank Jackson and Michael Smith for comments and discussions and to Keith Lehrer for some very useful advice.

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Research School of Social Science
The Australian National University
Canberra, ACT 2601
Australia