

2017

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McKittrick, Jennifer, "Indirect Directness" (2017). *Faculty Publications - Department of Philosophy*. 51.
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Indirect Directness

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In “Teleological Dispositions,” Nick Kroll appeals to teleology to account for the way that dispositions seem to be directed toward their merely possible manifestations. He argues that his teleological account of dispositions (TAD) does a better job of making sense of this directedness than rival approaches that appeal to conditional statements or physical intentionality. In this short critique, I argue that, without satisfactory clarification of a number of issues, TAD does not adequately account for the directedness of dispositions. I focus on two aspects of TAD: the Activation Principle, and the proposed necessary and sufficient conditions for being a dispositional property.

It is common in the dispositions literature to say that a disposition has a trigger, also known as a stimulus, stimulus condition, or circumstance of manifestation.¹ For example, a stimulus condition for fragility is said to be “being struck.” Insofar as a counterfactual conditional statement is true of an object in virtue of having a certain disposition, the antecedent of that conditional characterizes the stimulus condition for that disposition. For example, if the conditional “if it were struck, it would break” is true of the fragile glass in virtue of its being fragile, then “being struck” characterizes the stimulus for its fragility. As Kroll

Published in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, Volume 10, edited by Karen Bennett and Dean W. Zimmerman (2017), pp 38–46.

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¹ Some dispute the claim that dispositions have stimuli. See Vetter, Barbara. “Dispositions without Conditions.” *Mind* 123 (2014): 129–56 and Mumford, Stephen and Rani L. Anjum, *Getting Causes from Powers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2011): 37.

points out, some philosophers analyze “the glass is fragile” in terms of a conditional such as “if the glass were struck, it would break.” Kroll effectively characterizes many of the reasons conditional analyses have been on the defensive in recent years. Many philosophers have recognized numerous scenarios in which the truth values of the disposition ascription and that of counterfactual diverge.² To take a simple example, the counterfactual “if it were struck, it would break” is not true of the fragile glass when it is wrapped in bubble wrap. At this point, of course, there are many moves available to defenders of the conditional approach,³ but I will not rehearse them here. Rather, I want to focus on Kroll’s alternative to conditional accounts of dispositions—his teleological account. I begin with a key principle of Kroll’s account, the Activation Principle:

“(AV) If x ’s disposition to M when C is activated, then either x immediately M s or there is some process such that if the process were to continue without interruption, x would M .”

On the face of it, this principle seems subject to the same kinds of counterexamples as conditional analyses. If the glass’s disposition to break when struck is activated by striking while it is wrapped in bubble-wrap, the glass does not immediately break, and quite possibly, there is no process which is such that, if it were to continue without

² Numerous objectors to conditional analyses of disposition ascriptions include Vetter (op. cit.) as well as Smith, A. D. “Dispositional Properties.” *Mind* 86 (1977): 439-45; Martin, C. B. “Dispositions and Conditionals,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 44 (1994): 1-8; Bird, Alexander. “Dispositions and Antidotes,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 48 (1998): 227-34; Molnar, George. “Are Dispositions Reducible?” *Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (1999): 1-17, 145-67; Clarke, Rudolph. “Intrinsic Finks,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 58 (2008): 512-18; Everett, Anthony. “Intrinsic Finks, Masks, and Mimics,” *Erkenntnis* 71 (2009): 191-203; Schrenk, Markus. “Hic Rhodos, Hic Salta: From Reductionist Semantics to a Realist Ontology of Forceful Dispositions,” in Damschen, Gregor, Robert Schnepf, and Karsten R Stüber, eds., *Debating Dispositions: Issues in Metaphysics, Epistemology and Philosophy of Mind*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009.

³ See Choi, Sungho. “The Simple vs. Reformed Conditional Analysis of Dispositions.” *Synthese* 148 (2006): 369-79; Gundersen, L. (2002). In Defence of the Conditional Account of Dispositions. *Synthese*, 130, 389-411.

interruption, the glass would break. However, Kroll claims that the activation principle is counterexample free. How could this be? Kroll claims that his account avoids such counterexamples by making a distinction between a disposition being “activated” and its stimulus condition obtaining. Accordingly, a disposed object can be subject to the stimulus condition for its disposition without that disposition being activated. In other words, the disposition can be “stimulated” without being “activated.” Kroll gives the following examples to illustrate stimulation without activation: a vase wrapped in bubble wrap is dropped, and is consequently subject to the stimulus condition for “the disposition to break when dropped,” but the disposition is not activated; a computer’s disposition to overheat is subject to the stimulus condition—running a large number of processes—but the computer’s disposition to overheat is not activated due to the computer’s cooling mechanisms.

The distinction between “a disposed object being in stimulating circumstances” on the one hand, and “an object having its disposition activated” on the other, makes some intuitive sense. But I suspect that part of this intuitive appeal draws on the plausible distinction between the stimulus condition partially obtaining and the stimulus condition fully obtaining. Arguably, the stimulus condition for the disposition to break when struck does not fully obtain if something is dropped while wrapped in bubble wrap. If the distinction between partial and complete stimulus conditions is not the kind of distinction Kroll has in mind, then it must be that every aspect of the stimulus condition could fully obtain, and yet the activation of the disposition does not occur. What, then, is this activation? What kind of thing is it? What are the grounds or truth-makers for “*x*’s disposition to *M* when *C* is activated”?

Clearly, an activation is supposed to be something that happens at a time—prior to, or simultaneous with the disposition’s manifestation, as (AV) suggests. I assume that an activation happens in a place as well, somewhere in the vicinity of the disposed object. Since an activation has a duration and a location, it seems like an event. But if the activation is an event, it is clearly supposed to be an event that is distinct from the stimulus event. So, consider a case where an unprotected glass is struck and it breaks. If the striking started a process that continued without interruption, when and where did the activation happen? One possibility is that it happened at the same time and

place as the striking. If that is so, we need some criteria for event-identity beyond spatio-temporal location to differentiate the stimulus event from the activation. Perhaps these two supposedly different events involve instantiation of different properties. But what properties does an activation event have? Another possibility is that the activation happens after the stimulus occurs. So, the striking happens, and *then* the disposition to break when struck is *activated*, initiating a process which continues uninterrupted until the glass breaks. And if it just so happens that the process never starts, that's no problem for the account, because we can just say that, while stimulated, the disposition was never *activated*. And what's the reason for thinking the disposition was not activated? Perhaps we should think that the activation did not occur because neither the manifestation, nor a process leading to the manifestation, occurred. It's not clear if there could be any independent empirical evidence that an activation did or did not occur.

What if the manifestation happened immediately upon the occurrence of the stimulus? Suppose the glass shatters instantaneously upon being struck. Then the activation must be simultaneous with both the striking and the breaking. If the activation is a third event happening at the same place and time, again it is hard to see any independent empirical evidence for its occurrence. Either an activation is a mysterious and *ad hoc* third event (in addition to the stimulus and the manifestation) or it is indistinguishable from the initial stage of the process leading to the manifestation, or it is indistinguishable from the manifestation itself. If the activation is construed as either the manifestation, or as the initial stage of the process leading to the manifestation, then the account becomes circular and trivial. It would essentially say:

If x 's disposition to M when C is such that x immediately M s or some process leading to x M -ing commences, then either x immediately M s or there is some process such that, if the process were to continue without interruption, x would M .

None of these options seem very attractive, so I assume Kroll will want to say something else about the nature of activation, or the truth-makers of activation claims. In doing so, perhaps he could address another concern about his stimulus/activation distinction. Clearly, on Kroll's

view, the stimulus is not sufficient for the activation of the disposition. Nor is the stimulus sufficient for the manifestation, nor for any process that would lead to the manifestation. However, the *activation* is sufficient for the manifestation, or it is sufficient for the commencement of a process that would lead to the manifestation. Consequently, it seems like activation is where the action is at. So, then what is the role of the stimulus? Is it possible to activate a disposition without the stimulus occurring? If so, then the stimulating circumstance *C* seems irrelevant. Something that has “a disposition to *M* in *C*” may or may not *M* in *C*, but it must *M* (or commence a processes leading to *M*-ing) when it is *activated*. Perhaps “the disposition to *M* in *C*” should be called “the disposition to *M* when *activated*.” Cases in which fragile glasses stay intact *when struck* would be irrelevant, since striking is merely a stimulus, and the thing that matters for manifesting is activation. This makes the questions about the nature of activation more pressing, because it seems like the only rationale for positing the idea that an activation occurred (or did not occur) is the occurrence (or nonoccurrence) of a manifestation (or a process leading to a manifestation). Such a rationale for making claims about when activations occur makes the Activation Principle counterexample-free by fiat.

An alternative to making the stimulus incidental to the manifestation process is to say that activation does not occur unless the stimulus occurs that the stimulus is necessary for the activation. But what sort of necessity could this be? Perhaps the activation is grounded in the stimulus? But seeing as most accounts of grounding consider grounds to be sufficient for the grounded,⁴ this would have the consequence that a stimulus is sufficient for an activation, contrary to Kroll’s account. Then perhaps the activation *causally* depends on the stimulus? In other words, perhaps the stimulus causes the activation. If this is right, it raises the question:

- (1) Why does a stimulus sometimes cause an activation, and sometimes not?

Maybe sometimes a stimulus has all that it takes to cause an activation, and other times the stimulus lacks something. Note the similarities to

⁴ *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*, ed. F. Correia and B. Schnieder. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

the earlier discussion about partial and complete stimulus conditions. Also, note the similarity between question (1) and a question implicitly considered earlier with respect to conditional analyses:

- (2) Why does a stimulus sometimes cause a manifestation, and sometimes not?

Kroll might answer question (2) by saying that, sometimes, stimulus causes an activation, and sometimes it doesn't. But if there's no answer to question (1), then this answer to question (2) is unsatisfying. And answering question (1) would seem to require getting specific, or appealing to ideal conditions, or normal conditions, or any of the other moves that defenders of conditional analyses have tried—moves which Kroll criticizes. Another way to put the point is as follows. According to a simple account of the manifestation process, when a disposition is stimulated, it manifests. We noted a problematic mismatch between stimulated dispositions and manifesting dispositions. Kroll's alternative offers a perfect match between activated dispositions and manifesting dispositions.⁵ Yet the account entails an unexplained mismatch between stimulated dispositions and activated dispositions. So, the introduction of "activation" adds another element or step to the manifestation process, thereby relocating, but not solving, the problem with the simpler account.

Kroll goes on to develop his Teleological Account of Dispositions (TAD) beyond the Activation Principle. Insofar as dispositions are directed at their manifestations, a teleological directedness seems like a plausible way to go. However, the details of the account warrant clarification. One of the key tenets of TAD states necessary and sufficient conditions for a property to be a disposition:

- “(T2) Necessarily: a property *P* is a disposition iff there is a condition *C* and event-type *M* such that necessarily, *P* is the property of being in a state directed at the end that one *Ms* when *C*.”

⁵ I am simplifying slightly. Kroll's perfect match is between activated dispositions and manifestations (or interruptible processes leading to manifestations).

One implication of this analysis is that the existence of the stimulating condition is necessary for a property to be a disposition. It is implausible to think that this means that a particular occurrence of the stimulus is necessary for the disposition to exist. So, it must mean that the stimulus-type is necessary for the disposition to exist. I am not sure what the existence conditions for stimulus-types are. Perhaps, in order for a type of event to exist in a world, an instance of that type must occur in that world. That would have the implication that, say, in a world where immersion in water has never occurred, there is no such thing as water-solubility. Also, in the actual world, there would be no dispositions to manifest in merely possible kinds of circumstances.

This implication aside, my first question about (T2) is, what does Kroll mean by “a property of being in a state”? To answer that, one would have to say what a state is. Perhaps a state is a state of affairs, which some philosophers construe as a particular instantiating a property.⁶ Then “a property of being in a state” would be “a property of being a particular instantiating a property,” and the account does not say what this further property is. If a disposition is a property of being a particular with a certain property, this suggests that a disposition is a second-order property—a property that a thing has in virtue of having some other property. This further suggests that a disposition must have some sort of basis, or grounds. This claim has been disputed by a number of dispositions theorists.⁷

Whatever a state is, according to (T2), some states are directed at an end. So then a disposition is a property of being in a state, and this state is directed at an end. According to Kroll, it is the state that is directed at the end, not the disposition. So, despite being promised an account of a disposition’s directedness, what’s directed is not the disposition, but a state. Is the disposition indirectly directed at the end in virtue of being a property of a state that is directed at an end?

⁶ See, for example, Armstrong, D. M. *A World of States of Affairs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁷ See, for example, McKittrick, Jennifer. “The Bare Metaphysical Possibility of Bare Dispositions.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96 (2003): 349–69; Mumford, Stephen. “The Ungrounded Argument.” *Synthese* 149 (2006): 471–89; Bird, Alexander. “The Regress of Pure Powers?” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 57 (2007): 513–34.

Then dispositions are at best indirectly directed, so to speak. Perhaps there's nothing problematic here, but featuring "states" in this analysis adds apparently unnecessary complications, since the motivation for doing so is unclear.

My second line of questions about (T2) are about the end at which the state is directed—"that one *Ms* when *C*." What does it mean to be directed at *M*-ing when *C*? Does it mean that, when *C* happens, one is directed at *M*-ing? Or, does it mean that one is directed at *C* happening so that one can *M*? Or does it mean that one is directed at both *C* happening and *M*-ing? For example, if the end of "the disposition to break when struck" is that one breaks when struck, does that mean that one aims at getting struck and consequently breaking? If so, then fragile things are, in part, directed at getting struck. It is implausible to think that disposed objects are in a state such that they are directed towards triggering their dispositions, even in part. Perhaps, instead, one aims at breaking *only when one is struck*. This suggests that when one isn't struck, one isn't aiming at breaking. This would have the consequence that when dispositions aren't in the stimulating circumstances, they are not directed at their manifestations. If so, then this analysis does not account for the directedness of dispositions when stimulating circumstances do not obtain.

Furthermore, when Kroll writes that the state is directed at the end that "one *Ms* when *C*," what is the referent of "one"? Anything? So, perhaps the state is directed at an existential fact that *something Ms* when *C*? We get some clarification in (T2.1), which is said to follow from (T2):

"(T2.1): Necessarily: a property *P* is a disposition iff there is a condition *C* and event-type *M* such that: necessarily, *x* has *P* iff *x* is in a state directed at the end that *x Ms* when *C*."

So, the object that has the disposition is the "one" that *Ms*, if the end is realized. Since (T2) does not specify what thing *Ms* in the end, it is not clear how (T2.1) is supposed to follow from (T2). At any rate, it is questionable whether we should accept (T2.1), for it entails that the locus of manifestation is always the disposed object. Consequently, it rules out the possibility that a thing can have a disposition for *something else* to *M*. But examples of such dispositions are

common: being lethal, poisonous, soporific, attractive, or provocative, for example. Perhaps Kroll would want to say that, in such cases the manifestation is *causing* death, *causing* poisoning, *causing* sleep, etc. and these are things that the disposed object does when its disposition is activated. But is “causing death” an event-type? It sounds like a causal process, and various kinds of causal processes can be causings of death. Furthermore, “*M*-ing when *C*” is supposed to be “the end.” If the end is “causing death,” the end at which the state is directed is itself a causal process, and not the end of that causal process. But if, instead, the manifestation is the end of that causal process—sleeping, dying, being angry, etc.—then the particular that is “*M*-ing” is not the particular that had the disposition in question, and (T2.1) should be rejected.

Even if these questions about (T2.1) have satisfactory answers, there are further questions to consider about ends. Kroll approvingly quotes Makin: “a teleological process has a privileged stage to which it runs in normal conditions.” If the end is truly a privileged state, then not just any *M*-ing will do—only *M*-ing *when C*. So the characterization of the stimulating circumstances matters. And *M*-ing is said to be one event-type. Typing events has its own challenges: does shattering into thousands of shards, chipping, cracking, and splitting in two all count as instances of the event-type “breaking?” Regardless, a surprising consequence of this account is that it rules out multi-track dispositions. Multi-track dispositions manifest via different types of events in different types of circumstances.⁸ For example, courage can manifest by rushing into a burning building, or by standing up for an unpopular political position. One manifestation of electrical charge is attraction (in the stimulating circumstances of being in proximity to certain kinds of particles) and another manifestation of electrical charge is repulsion (in the stimulating circumstance of being in proximity to *other* kinds of particles). Kroll could say that attraction and repulsion are really the same type of event, but then the criteria for event-typing looks suspiciously *ad hoc*. Kroll could side with Alexander Bird and say that charge is merely a cluster of different dispositions

⁸ See Ryle, Gilbert. *The Concept of Mind*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949, for an introduction to the multi-track/single-track distinction. See Vetter, Barbara. *Potentiality: From Dispositions to Modality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 36-46, for arguments that all dispositions are massively multi-track.

with different manifestations.⁹ And Kroll could say that, while there are many different dispositions to do many different kinds of dangerous or frightening things, there is no such thing as courage. Such costs follow from defining dispositions as exclusively “single-track.”

Furthermore, recall that (T2.1) says that when x has a dispositional property to M in C , “... x is in a state directed at the end that x M s when C .” So, consider a puddle of water. It has many dispositions: to freeze when cold, to evaporate when hot, to dissolve salt when salt is immersed in it, and many others. So, according to Kroll’s account, the puddle is in a state directed at the end that it freezes when cold, and it is in a state directed at the end that it evaporates when hot, and it is in a state directed at the end that it dissolves salt when salt is immersed in it. If each particular <stimulus-type, manifestation-type> pair corresponds to a different disposition, and we differentiate event-types in a relatively fine-grained way, this list is innumerably long. So, how many states is the puddle in? Is it just one state that is directed at all of these different ends? Then the puddle would be in one state simultaneously directed at innumerably many ends, most of which could not be jointly realized. If there is a different state for each stimulus-manifestation pair, the puddle would simultaneously be in innumerably many states, and simultaneously directed at innumerably many ends, most of which could not be jointly realized. And the simple puddle would be no anomaly, in terms of its massively-multi-directedness.

Summing up, the main reasons why TAD does not adequately account for a disposition’s directedness are the following. First, TAD depends on the idea that dispositions lead to their manifestations when they are activated, but it is unclear what it means to say a disposition is activated as opposed to being stimulated. Second, TAD does not attribute directedness to the disposition itself. Third, TAD does not account for directedness when the stimulating circumstances do not obtain. Fourth, if TAD does give us directedness, it gives too much, for it seems to entail that everything is always directed in innumerably many different directions.

⁹ Bird, Alexander. *Nature’s Metaphysics: Laws and Properties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 21-4. Vetter points out that this conflicts with our best scientific understanding of such properties (*Potentiality: From Dispositions to Modality*).