

## Determining potential: on properties and circumstances

What determines what an object can do? Some might say that it is the object's internal structure: An object is built and set up a certain way and this determines what the object can do, what can be done with it, and how it will interact with and respond to other objects under various possible conditions. However, asking what an object can do is to some extent a practical question. If I ask whether a boat can float, I am asking whether it can float given the external circumstances in which I can expect it to be.

Support for a distinction between an object's intrinsic properties and its potential seems like an ideal task for the distinction between categorical and dispositional properties. If a distinction between the categorical and the dispositional is to be made, its most salient purpose is to separate an object's potential, or what it can do, from its internal structure.

In a recent paper<sup>1</sup>, Galen Strawson endorses a view that seems to threaten this role of the distinction between the categorical and the dispositional. While apparently retaining that distinction, he claims that the total collection of an object's categorical properties is identical with the collection of its dispositional properties. This commits him to the view that all dispositions are intrinsic and if his argument succeeds, he has shown that an object's potential is solely determined by its internal structure.

In this paper, I point out two main flaws in Strawson's argument and argue that external circumstances do affect an object's potential.

The first problem is that Strawson's claim that an object's dispositions remain the same through different nomic environments commits results in the strange view that objects have all kinds of far-fetched counterfactual dispositions indexed to exotic possible worlds while they do not have dispositions requiring minor changes in their actual environment.

The second problem is that Strawson's view seems to commit him to the view that dispositions must be indexed to circumstances, i.e. that an object cannot have a given disposition simpliciter but only as indexed to circumstances and even to possible worlds. Analogous accounts have been given on various subjects, such as on colors and taste predicates, and even as a solution to the problem of temporary intrinsics. I argue that the loss of the ability to say that an object has a disposition simpliciter is a high price to pay, and furthermore that indexing disposition seems to be an ad hoc solution.

Finally, I discuss the merits of the position that objects have at least some of their dispositions simpliciter and argue that it accompanies a view of the world according to which the circumstances and environment of an object have a more prominent effect on its potential than otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> Strawson, G. (2008), "The identity of the categorical and the dispositional," *Analysis* 68(300), 271-282.