# A Wittgensteinian Perspective on Dispositions

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# Contents

# Abbreviations

**BB**     *The Blue and Brown Books* (1969) [1933–1935], ed. R. Rhees, second edition, Oxford: Blackwell.

**LPP**    *Wittgenstein's Lectures on Philosophical Psychology 1946–47, Notes by P.T. Geach, K.J. Shah, and A.C. Jackson* (1988), ed. P.T. Geach, Sussex: Harvester.

**OC**     *On Certainty* (1974) [1951], ed. G.E.M. Anscombe, G.H. von Wright, trans. D. Paul, G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell.

**PG**     *Philosophical Grammar* (1974) [1932–1934]. (1974), ed. R. Rhees, trans. A.J.P. Kenny, Oxford: Blackwell.

**PI**     *Philosophical Investigations* (2009) [1938–1945], ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, fourth, revised edition by P.M.S. Hacker, J. Schulte, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, J. Schulte, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

**PPF**    *Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment* (2009) [1946–1949], in PI (2009), pp. 183–243 [Previously known as PI "Part II."].

**PR**     *Philosophical Remarks* (1975) [1929–1930], ed. R. Rhees, trans. R. Hargreaves, R. White, Oxford: Blackwell.

**RFM**    *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (1978) [1937–1944], ed. G.H. von Wright, R. Rhees, G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, third, revised, and reset edition, Oxford: Blackwell.

**RPP I**    *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (Vol. 1) (1980) [1945–1947],
ed. G.E.M. Anscombe, G.H. von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe,
Oxford: Blackwell.

**RPP II**   *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (Vol. 2) (1980) [1948], ed.
G.H. von Wright, H. Nyman, trans. C.G. Luckhardt, M.A.E. Aue,
Oxford: Blackwell.

**VW**      *The Voices of Wittgenstein—The Vienna Circle, Ludwig Wittgenstein
and Friedrich Waismann* (2003), ed. G.P. Baker, trans. G.P. Baker
et al, London: Routledge.

**Z**       *Zettel* (1967) [1945–1948], ed. G.E.M. Anscombe, G.H. von
Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.

# 1

# Introduction

## 1.1 What and Why

There is no agreement on what exactly a disposition is, yet ordinary language is rife with dispositional terms: we say that a friend of us is *brave*, *jealous*, *irascible*, or *shy*. We say that we *can* play a particular game or that we *are able* to do some rule-governed activity. Moreover, we often act spontaneously, implicitly referring to dispositions. For example, we put a lump of sugar in a cup of hot coffee and stir it with a little spoon, waiting for the sugar to dissolve in the hot liquid. We know that sugar is *soluble*, that is, it is disposed to dissolve when plunged into water and other liquids. We play with a rubber band and we expect it not to break, for we know—and ordinarily say—that a rubber band is *elastic*, that is, it is disposed to straighten without breaking when stretched. If someone asks us why we carefully protect the new set of crystal glasses, we would probably answer that we do this because those glasses are *fragile*, that is, they are disposed to easily break when struck.

Sugar and salt are soluble. A rubber band is elastic. A crystal glass is fragile. My colleagues are intelligent. My best friend's partner is jealous. I can speak English and French and I know how to play the trumpet. Now,

already these examples bring our attention to a variety of dispositions that are captured by different linguistic expressions: firstly, we find what I call here as physical dispositions of the matter, such as solubility and fragility. These dispositions are linguistically captured by a class of predicates that is not limited to those with suffixes; arguably, the words "soft", "opaque", "fragile", "poisonous" are indicative of the dispositional just like the words "ed*ible*", "irasc*ible*", "flex*ible*", and "excit*able*". Secondly, we find character traits and features of both human beings and animals. For example, it is common to ascribe aggressiveness, or quietness to animals. Finally, there is a group of terms which are applied to human beings' behaviour and that refer to intelligent activities or, we could say for now, activities that are exercises of mental capacity. These dispositions are linguistically captured both by expressions of power, like "can", "be able to", "knowing how to", "be capable of", and by some mental terms such as "believe", "know", "intend", "understand", etc.

What do these terms have in common to be labelled dispositional? For now, I suggest to look at some common features of their use in ordinary language. A univocal and precise definition of the term "disposition" is not just something that we do not actually have in our hands, but it is something we would better not aspire to. Preliminarily, we could say that the concept of disposition tells us something that is still latent and still not actualized; it refers to a potentiality and it takes the form of a modal concept in ordinary language. A disposition is associated with a set of stimulus conditions and a characteristic manifestation. For example, the dispositional term "solubility" refers to the fact that something—the object to which it is ascribed—Is disposed to dissolve when put into water: dipping into water is the stimulus condition, while dissolution in water is the corresponding manifestation. The same applies to character traits too; saying that someone is brave means saying that this person is disposed to behave in a certain way under certain circumstances. For example, this person would probably dive into the water if they saw people drowning. Finally, abilities and capacities are dispositional concepts for they refer to what is intuitively thought to be something which is possessed even when it is not concretely externalized: I can speak English even when I do not actually speak it. I can legitimately say to know how to play chess even when I am not efficiently playing chess at the moment

of speaking. In a certain sense, the sentence "I can speak English" amounts to saying that I am disposed to speak English correctly in certain communicative situations. Similarly, stating that I know how to play chess amounts to saying that I would play chess well and correctly if there was the opportunity to play with someone. It is for this reason that, historically, the mark of the dispositional has been captured by some kind of conditional sentence. Reference to potentiality is indeed commonly construed using the counterfactual conditional: if someone asks us what the term "soluble" means, it seems that we are entitled to answer by saying that the word "soluble" means that the object to which it is ascribed would dissolve if it were put into water.

The decision to write about dispositions stemmed from a personal experience, yet embedded in a particular philosophical context. I felt a tension between what I thought to be the ordinary job of dispositional terms, and the way in which dispositions are dealt with in recent debates on the topic. In particular, my interest came from a question about Wittgenstein's later philosophy: isn't Wittgenstein's characterization of understanding as mastery of a technique *dispositional*? Could we employ the notion of disposition in order to give an account of Wittgenstein's *positive* view on meaning and understanding as it is reconstructed from his remarks on Rule-following and psychological concepts? I answered yes. My intuition was that the positive account consists in thinking about understanding as human beings' ability to correctly follow rules that have been acquired through both training and education. Similarly, I thought that the characterization of meaning as use can be further expounded as stating that knowing the meaning of a term consists in being disposed to employ that term correctly, that is, in accordance with its grammatical rules.

However, when I started reading secondary literature on dispositions, I realized that a naturalizing approach was dominant and authors referred to dispositions mainly by looking at physical dispositions such as solubility, fragility, conductivity, and so on. Little attention was given to specific human behaviour. I will refer to this body of works as "The current paradigm on dispositions". In other words, the notion of disposition belonging to the current paradigm seemed to me inapplicable to Wittgenstein's philosophy. Furthermore, I felt a tension between the contemporary

treatment of the notion of disposition and the use of the concept both in ordinary language and in the history of philosophy. Globally, the notion of disposition seemed to me extensively employed without a preliminarily clarification of the concept itself and the criteria of use, hence the need to enquiry again a concept which occupies an important place within philosophical reflection and that seems an indispensable element of our language.

That is the "Why". Now I shall spend a few words on the "What".

In this work I use some aspects of Wittgenstein's later philosophy to suggest an alternative approach to the notion of disposition. My idea is that such alternative approach could respond to some limits of the current paradigm. In particular, I will enquire the possibility to talk about dispositions in grammatical-normative terms. This talk is an alternative to two talks that characterize the current paradigm: a metaphysical talk and a naturalistic-reductive talk. Furthermore, the approach I intend to defend rejects the common assumption according to which all dispositions are essentially non-normative.

Wittgenstein criticizes a kind of dispositional account of knowing and understanding in the *Philosophical Investigations*[1] (PI) by working with a notion of disposition as a state of a physical apparatus. However, if a different and less reductive use of the notion is accepted, then it is plausible to speak about dispositions in order to give an account of the conception of language and understanding that stems from Wittgenstein's remarks on Rule-following. Indeed, the concept of disposition can be used to give an account of the tendency to react in a certain way after some training or educative process, without giving a deterministic and behaviouristic sense to the relation between stimulus and response. Dispositions as such can be acquired and learned; they can constitute, so to speak, a cultural product.

However, the current paradigm on dispositions is extensively influenced by a naturalizing perspective: authors share some basic aspects on the study of dispositions. They can be said to belong to a specific

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[1] Henceforth "Investigations". I use abbreviations to refer to Wittgenstein's works in the text. With the symbol "§" I refer to a particular paragraph. When there is just a comma after the abbreviation, I refer to page numbers. For the list of abbreviations, see the section "Abbreviations".

paradigm which rests on the following three main assumptions: 1. Hypostatization of dispositions; 2. Identification of dispositions with mere natural capacities; 3. Causal account of dispositions.

My aim is to give an account of a kind of disposition, essentially linked to human life and rule-governed behaviour, that is not characterisable in terms of inner state or property of its bearer; rather, it is an ability, or mastery of a technique. In particular, my thesis is twofold: firstly, it is misleading to ask about the meaning of the term "disposition" assuming a denotative theory of meaning. Secondly, the divorce between dispositions and normativity is neither a platitude nor a desirable assumption: I will claim that the naturalized concept of disposition belonging to the current paradigm gains legitimacy and importance thanks to the ordinary concept of disposition, which is not naturalized. On the contrary, it is a concept whose use rests on a picture of dispositions as something *natural*, for they are part of an acquired and incorporated system, but *normative*, hence not entirely reducible to innate and biological capacities. The normative dimension of specifically human dispositions can be characterized in terms of contingency, or possibility: dispositions do not force or determine their correspondent manifestations. The kind of normativism I will suggest is a *third way* between naturalization of dispositions on the one hand, that is, a conception of dispositions as mere natural biological facts and, on the other hand, a kind of metaphysical normativism that presupposes the existence of normative facts that should force action just like moral imperatives. According to the third way I endorse, dispositions (1) can be treated as natural facts. However, firstly, those facts are not mere biological facts. Secondly, those facts are not grounding facts; rather, dispositional concepts are used in order to give *reasons* of courses of action; (2) contrary to the old empiricist suspicion against dispositions in virtue of their empirical inaccessibility, dispositions can be *seen*, provided that a notion of empirical accessibility different from direct observation of objects is employed.

In order to reach this goal, I will first expound the current paradigm on dispositions and I will show that its limits derive from a set of problematic presuppositions (Chap. 2). In this respect, the reader will not find a direct answer to the open questions belonging to the current research on dispositions. My point is that some of those open questions come from

problematic presuppositions; therefore, what is needed is a conceptual enquiry both on the concept of disposition and on the shared assumptions. Secondly, I will present the kind of dispositionalism that can be found in Wittgenstein's late remarks (Chap. 3) and I will look into Wittgenstein's own use of the term "disposition" (Chap. 4). Thirdly, I will make use of the Wittgensteinian perspective together with Ryle's account of dispositions in order to critically engage with the current paradigm: I will show that a naturalized perspective on dispositions rests on a category mistake and that, for this reason, naturalization turns out to be pseudo-science (Chap. 5). Finally, I will present some examples of philosophical views where a notion of normative disposition is actually employed (Chap. 6).

## 1.2    Summary

Chapter 2 is about the historical debate on dispositions and disposition ascriptions, with a specific focus on recent contributions to the topic. I will show that this debate is rooted in the traditional empirical problem of the *inaccessibility of the disposition*, which is grounded on the idea that dispositional terms denote hidden states or properties of objects and individuals.

Firstly, I will focus on the conditional analysis of dispositions and its limits. From this we will reach the core of the "dispositions first reaction". Secondly, I will present the current paradigm on dispositions by distinguishing between a naturalistic-reductive talk (Armstrong, 1996) and a metaphysical talk (Mumford, 1998). I will show that the current naturalized paradigm rests on the following assumptions: 1. Hypostatization, or reification of dispositions, that I will call "The ontological must", that is, the idea that dispositions must be real entities to be legitimately ascribed to objects; 2. The "simplification fallacy", that is, the identification of dispositions with mere natural capacities; 3. Causal efficacy of dispositions; 4. A picture of potentiality that I will call "potentiality that lies in a box": the idea that the manifestation of the disposition is already contained as it is in the realm of potentiality, as if potentiality was something contained in a box that has merely to come out the way it is to get actual.

Finally, I will present what I believe to be the limits of the current paradigm which directly derive from the shared assumptions: 1. There is no third way between mentalism and behaviourism, and between heuristic function and ontological foundation of dispositions; 2. Narrowness of the philosophical discourse on dispositions; 3. Materialist character of the realist perspective; 4. Divorce between dispositions and normativity.

The general aim is to show that authors share at least three aspects on the study of dispositions: 1. The assumption according to which dispositions are essentially non-normative; 2. A factual treatment of the question "What is a disposition?"; 3. A notion of disposition as a latent depositary of pre-arranged—yet not externalized—courses of action.

Chapter 3 focuses on the debate generated by Kripke's *Wittgenstein on rules and private language* (Kripke, 1982) and the dispositional reading of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. The general aim is twofold: on the one hand, I will defend a particular interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks; on the other hand, I will argue that Wittgenstein's perspective helps criticizing the current paradigm because it does not rest on the same misleading presuppositions.

Although Wittgenstein writes against a particular kind of dispositionalism in the *Investigation*, I will show that Wittgenstein addresses his critical stance towards who endorses *all* the following three theses: 1. Knowledge of ABC *is* a disposition of the subject; 2. The disposition of knowing *is* a *mental state*; 3. The expression "mental state" is further explained using the model of the physical state of an apparatus. Therefore, in this context the disposition is a state of a physical apparatus. Given this, I will argue that it is possible to find a dispositional account within Wittgenstein's philosophy in which the above three theses are not supported.

Firstly, I will engage with Kripke's work because it generated a new interest in dispositions and in the normativity of meaning. In particular, I will focus on two aspects: Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein ("Kripkenstein"), and Kripke's own views on dispositions, meaning, and understanding. My aim is to argue that (1) the dispositional account discussed by Kripke fails because, on the one hand a narrow and naturalized characterization of disposition is assumed and, on the other hand, dispositions so conceived cannot fulfil the role that they should cover within the boundaries of the sceptical challenge; (2) critics generally

responded to Kripke's sceptical paradox by assuming both the legitimacy of Kripke's notion of fact and the paradox itself, and a narrow characterization of dispositions as physical and non-normative states.

Secondly, I will present my own dispositional reading of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. I will argue that Wittgenstein's dispositionalism can be found by looking at his positive account of Rule-following, provided that both Kripke's interpretation and the assumptions shared by the critics who engaged with Kripke's work are rejected: 1. Contrary to Kripke's dispositionalism, Wittgenstein's dispositionalism is not a kind of direct response to the sceptical challenge, that is, it does not provide dispositional facts as candidates for the role of grounding fact, mainly because no such fact is needed to justify the linguistic practice; 2. Contrary to Kripke's perspective, Wittgenstein talks about some general facts of nature but such facts do not play a foundational role; 3. Dispositions play a different role than the one demanded by the kripkean sceptic: they do not determine meaning, that is, they do not guarantee constitutive normativity, and they do not metaphysically ground the practice.

Chapter 4 focuses on Wittgenstein's own use of the notion of disposition. Firstly, I will present some significant dispositional readings and I will distinguish between two main groups: 1. Dispositional readings that lead to a naturalization of Wittgenstein's philosophy; 2. Dispositional readings that preserve Wittgenstein's anti-scientific naturalism and where a de-naturalized notion of disposition is actually at work. My aim is to show that the critics state that the notion of disposition employed to give an account of Wittgenstein's view on understanding is not endorsed by Wittgenstein, because they think that he had in mind, by contrast, a narrow and materialistic conception of disposition. Secondly, I will argue that critics' shared assumption is false: if we look at other places of the Wittgensteinian *corpus*, it is possible to find a Wittgensteinian use of the notion of disposition which is line with my dispositional reading of Rule-following. Wittgenstein employs a de-naturalized notion of disposition. I will show that Wittgenstein does not criticize the use of the notion of disposition; rather, he writes against a particular use of the concept which stems from a misleading conception of possibility—the "shadowy model". According to this misleading model, linguistic dispositions would be mysterious entities or states that contain all the future applications of the

word in a latent but already actualized form. The misleading use coincides with the use of the notion belonging to the current paradigm. Finally, I will present other dispositional elements of Wittgenstein's philosophy: the dispositional character of aspect-seeing and the theme of novelty and creativity of behaviour within the boundaries of the conception of understanding as a kind of knowledge-how.

In Chap. 5 I will develop the de-naturalized Wittgensteinian account of dispositions by working with Ryle's notions of "category mistake" and "para-mechanical fallacy" (Ryle, 1990). In particular, I will develop the idea according to which dispositions should not be characterized as latent but already actualized courses of actions. I will argue two things: 1. The metaphysical debate on dispositions rests on a confusion between the factual and the grammatical, or conceptual, therefore it is an instance of a category mistake; 2. Ryle's notion of category mistake applies to the conceptual misunderstanding which rests at the bottom of the "shadowy model" picture applied to dispositional concepts, therefore what is needed is an account of dispositions in which the concept of disposition is not characterized using the wrong term of comparison—that is—using the model of physical and empirically accessible objects.

Firstly, I will show that the problem of a conceptual characterization of the dispositional as something latent, yet not already actualized in the mental sphere, was something present in Wittgenstein's philosophical *milieu*. It was a problem explicitly addressed by Russell (2008) in *The Analysis of Mind*, where a dispositional account of understanding is also defended. Secondly, I will reject a possible objection according to which Wittgenstein's perspective on dispositions—and Wittgenstein's philosophy in general—is elusive with respect to the main philosophical problems. I will address this objection because it undermines the possibility to construe a legitimate contrast between the Wittgensteinian perspective and the current paradigm on dispositions. Against this idea, I will claim that the Wittgensteinian perspective is elusive only if we pretend it to offer something that it cannot offer, that is, if we pretend it to be a factual response to a factual problem. Consequently, as a third step, I will distinguish between a factual enquiry on dispositional entities and a conceptual enquiry on the concept of disposition, by looking also at Ryle's distinction between factual questions and abstract questions. Finally, I

will argue that, just like the traditional dualism between mind and body rests on a category mistake for it construes the mind using physical objects as a term of comparison, so the non-normative notion of disposition is construed using physical empirically accessible objects as a term of comparison, yet with a pre-constituted notion of disposition which is not naturalized. Moreover, I will claim that the characterization of human dispositions as mere physiological states of the subjects is an instance of Ryle's para-mechanical fallacy. Dispositional concepts should be understood in the context of an anti-intellectualist knowledge-how, that is, a non-mediated customary behaviour.

Ryle's philosophy helps sustaining and developing a Wittgensteinian-informed perspective on dispositions because (1) it offers stronger theoretical tools for similar conceptual problems, (2) it is an example of philosophical view in which there is not an *a priori* divorce between dispositions and normativity, and (3) Ryle's account of dispositional statements as "inference-tickets" is an example of philosophical strategy to account for the hypothetical character of dispositions without presupposing the "shadowy model".

Chapter 6 focuses on the notion of normative disposition. In this chapter I will argue that at least some dispositions function like normative rules and the latter should be thought in terms of rules as competence. Firstly, I will present some examples of normative dispositionalism endorsed by some authors working in the fields of philosophy of mind and philosophy of action. The notion of normative disposition is not completely alien to philosophy and dispositional concepts have actually been used to give an account of the normativity of the intentional. In particular, I will deal with Dretske's, Williams', Elder-Vass' and Wedgwood's views. Dretske (1988) offers a concrete example of philosophical view in which dispositions are construed like rules as competence, rather than normal rules or rules as practical advices. Similarly, Williams (1999) too uses the notion of disposition in the context of procedural knowledge but she gives an explicit sociological sense to the normativity involved: dispositions are thought to be patterned ways of acting that constitute the social background of practice. The sociological character of normative practices is stressed by Elder-Vass (2012) too, who offers an account where dispositions are not thought to be causally efficient, for

the causal power is ascribed to what he calls "norm circle". Indeed, using a notion of normative disposition is not sufficient to avoid the risks of a naturalized account, because dispositions can be still understood as causally efficient. This position is found in Wedgwood (2009). Finally, I will go back to Wittgenstein's normative dispositionalism. With respect to normativity, there are two aspects which are shared by the authors discussed in the chapter, and other two aspects that are not always shared by the authors. The former are the idea that dispositions do not necessitate action, and the dispositional account of intentional states (normative behaviour). The latter are the emphasis on the character of contingency in terms of the sense of possibility (there are no metaphysical grounding facts at the bottom of the normative practice), and the idea that rules are not reducible to constitutive norms of action or prescriptions. The agreement mentioned by Wittgenstein at the end of the Rule-following remarks is not social.

In the last part of the chapter I will establish an analogy between the category mistake applied to dispositional concepts and the philosophical problem of the existence of other minds—what Egidi (2023) calls "The mentalistic prejudice"—because they both produce a false appearance by establishing logically wrong analogies and similes through an improper generalization of the denotative model of meaning. In particular, I will claim that the category mistake applied to dispositional terms is of the kind Wittgenstein imputes to the traditional *inner-outer divide* and that it can be avoided if we acknowledge the difference between transitive and intransitive grammar, hence between transitive use and intransitive use of linguistic expressions. If the category mistake is rejected, then there can be a way to state that dispositions can be seen, rather than being "super-private" objects: dispositions can be seen in the way Wittgenstein states that we see the glance of the human eye.

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