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BACKGROUND AND ABILITIES AS DISPOSITIONS

Abstract: This paper examines the connection between John Searle's concept of 'Background,' also known as background powers, and the philosophical notion of dispositions. Searle defines the Background as a set of non-representational, pre-intentional capacities that enable intentional actions. Dispositions, on the other hand, refer to inherent properties that predispose entities to behave in specific ways under certain conditions. This study argues that Searle's background powers can be interpreted through a dispositional framework. My argument in this paper is that since background powers are (fundamental) abilities of the mind and abilities are dispositions, background powers are, therefore, dispositions. The paper builds on Vetter's critique of two dominant dispositional models of abilities and offers a revised understanding that aligns with the dispositional framework. This interpretation has significant implications for the philosophical understanding of abilities and Searle's concept of the Background.

Keywords: Background, dispositions, abilities, John Searle, Vetter, pre-intentional capacities, dispositional framework

Introduction

In this research paper, we will explore the connection between Searle's 'Background,' also known as background powers, and the philosophical concept of dispositions. John Searle introduces the 'Background' as a set of non-representational, pre-intentional capacities that underpin intentional actions. Dispositions refer to inherent qualities or properties that lead entities to behave in specific ways when certain conditions are met. The central question of this study is whether Searle's background powers can be understood through a dispositional framework. In other words, we ask whether background powers could be defined as dispositions.

My argument is as follows: since background powers are abilities, more precisely, fundamental abilities of the mind, and since abilities are dispositions, background powers are dispositions.

That background powers are abilities does not need to be specifically argued beyond analyzing the concept of the Background. The challenge lies in providing a dispositional analysis of ability. In this, I will build on Vetter's critique of two dominant dispositional models of ability. She provides strong counterexamples to these models and forces the dispositional analysis of abilities to either be abandoned or find a third solution while keeping the dispositional framework.

This study is divided into four parts. The first part presents and expands on Searle's conception of the Background. The second part contains a surface-level analysis of the notion of disposition. I will not delve deeply into dispositions but will adhere to a working definition around which there is a consensus among philosophers. The third part presents Vetter's criticism of two dominant dispositional conceptions of ability. Finally, in the fourth part, I offer my understanding of ability as a kind of disposition. Judging that the definition I provide is adequate, I conclude that background powers can be understood as dispositions since they are also abilities.

The significance of the considerations I make here is twofold. It informs the debate about the interpretation of abilities. As Vetter notes, the concept of ability is insufficiently researched, yet it is taken as a primitive concept in many philosophical fields. Defining ability may contribute to solving problems in the domains where this concept appears. In her words:

"...abilities are invoked all over the place in philosophical theorizing: in accounts of concepts and of the mind itself (Millikan 2000; Kenny 2010), of conceivability (e.g., Yablo 1993), of agency (Mayr 2011) and activity (Groff 2013), of weakness of the will (Smith 2003), of omnipotence (Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 2012), of qualia (Lewis 1990), of empathy (Stueber 2006), of affordances (Scarantino 2003), and in non-virtue-theoretic accounts of knowledge (Hyman 1999, 2010) and its characteristic value (Carter et al. 2013), to name but a few. Most, though not all, of these use abilities as unexplained explainers." (Vetter, 2003, p. 216)

Second, Searle's notion of the Background is philosophically interesting in itself. Although it is well covered by Searle, he doesn't provide a dispositional reading of the Background. Here, I will attempt to do that. If successful, it will add to our understanding of this important notion.

1. Background Powers: Definition and Types

Searle's concept of background powers is fundamental to understanding how humans engage with the world automatically and seamlessly. These background powers refer to the set of non-representational, non-

conscious capacities that underpin our intentional actions and thoughts. Unlike intentional states, which are about something specific, background powers operate behind the scenes. They include skills, habits, and assumptions we rely on without thinking. For example, when we speak a language fluently, we don't actively reflect on grammar or syntax—this ability is part of our Background.

Searle divides these background powers into two categories: the deep background and the local background.¹

The deep background refers to universal, biologically ingrained capacities shared by all humans. These include basic abilities like recognizing objects, walking, or interpreting facial expressions. These capacities are essential for survival and interaction, operating in a pre-reflective way that we never consciously consider. No matter where you come from or what your cultural background is, these deep background powers are present and active.

The local background, by contrast, consists of culturally specific practices and skills shaped by one's social environment. These include the ability to navigate social norms, understand cultural symbols, or practice local customs. For example, using chopsticks versus a fork, or interpreting cultural gestures like a handshake or a bow, are part of the local background. These skills are still automatic and non-conscious in their application but are learned through social experience and shaped by cultural context. The local background, therefore, differs across societies and is crucial for navigating particular cultural landscapes.

While background powers operate automatically, they provide the necessary foundation for intentional states. Intentional states, such as beliefs, desires, and intentions, are representational—they are about something specific and are often consciously directed toward a goal or object. For instance, when you decide to greet someone, your intentional state involves the belief that greeting is appropriate in this context and the intention to perform the greeting. However, the actual mechanics of greeting—knowing how to smile, shake hands, or bow—are governed by your background powers, particularly your local background.

Intentional states rely on the Background to function smoothly. Without the Background, intentional states would be ineffective or impossible to carry out. For example, forming the intention to have a conversation presupposes that you have the background ability to understand and produce speech. Moreover, while background powers enable intentional

1 Searle introduces this distinction in his book *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. In his numerous subsequent works where he uses the term Background, the distinction is not made explicit, although it is implicitly acknowledged.

actions, they are non-representational—they do not involve conscious reflection or thought about how these actions are performed. Instead, they work in the background, as their name suggests, providing the necessary skills and know-how for intentional states to be enacted.

2. Basic Analysis of Dispositions

Now we turn to dispositions. Dispositions refer to qualities or properties that predispose an entity to behave in certain ways under specific conditions. For instance, fragility is a classic example of a disposition—an object is said to be fragile if it tends to break when struck.²

Dispositions could be contrasted with occurrent (or categorical) properties. Occurrent properties would be properties that manifest at a given moment. They represent the current state of an object or system and are directly observable. For instance, the temperature of a cup of tea, the redness of a rose, or the velocity of a moving car are all occurrent properties. These properties are active and present at the moment of observation and do not depend on external conditions for their manifestation. Unlike dispositions, which may never be actualized unless the right conditions arise, occurrent properties are present and observable right now. In other words, dispositional properties (like fragility) refer to potential behaviors or outcomes that an entity may exhibit under the right circumstances, while occurrent properties are about what is actively happening in the current moment. An object can be fragile (a disposition) without actually breaking, but it can only be at a specific temperature (an occurrent property) if that temperature is observable now.

Dispositions are typically described with two components: the stimulus condition (in our example, the striking of the object) and the manifestation (in our example, the breaking of the object). The stimulus condition is what triggers the manifestation to occur.

Specifying a particular disposition, like fragility, involves specifying its stimulus condition(s) and its manifestation. Similarly, to determine a kind of disposition—such as determining what kinds of dispositions are abilities—the kind of stimulus condition and the kind of manifestation must be provided.

2 Although definitions of dispositions remain philosophically contested, the one adopted here reflects a broadly accepted starting point. As Crane notes, even a preliminary account can serve specific purposes without settling all theoretical questions (Crane, 1996, p. 1). The aim of this paper is not to provide a comprehensive theory of dispositions, but rather to offer a definition of abilities understood dispositionally.

The contrast drawn here between dispositions and occurrent properties follows a widely accepted distinction in the metaphysics of dispositions (Mumford, 1998; Molnar, 2003). Occurrent properties are those instantiated and observable at a specific time (e.g., velocity, temperature), while dispositions are modal properties that may never manifest unless suitable conditions arise (e.g., fragility, solubility). While it is possible to analyze dispositions in terms of the distinction between possession and manifestation, the occurrent/dispositional contrast provides a clearer ontological grounding for analyzing abilities as capacities that may or may not be exercised, depending on circumstances. This treatment is consistent with the purpose of the paper, which is to argue that abilities—and thus background powers—are a species of disposition.

3. Vetter's Criticism of Major Dispositional Readings of Abilities

Having gained basic insight into the notion of dispositions, we now move to Vetter's criticism. Vetter critiques two major approaches to defining abilities through dispositional analysis: (1) abilities as dispositions to do what one intends to do, and (2) abilities as dispositions to successfully do what one already does. Articulated through the components described above, according to the first understanding, the ability to A (where A is a simple or complex action) is a disposition whose stimulus condition is the intention or conscious attempt to do A, while its manifestation is (the execution of) A. According to the second understanding, the ability to A is a disposition whose stimulus condition is (the execution of) A and the manifestation is the successful, i.e., good, performance of A.

Both of these approaches, she argues, fail to account for the complexity of abilities. The first view, which defines abilities as dispositions to act according to intention, oversimplifies the way in which abilities function. It ignores abilities that may not be linked to explicit intentions, such as innate or automatic skills like motor activities or creative processes, which can occur without the agent forming a specific intention to act. It is well established that these types of abilities cannot be performed when we (consciously) try to perform them. As Vetter notes:

“On the first account, we are to include abilities for complex actions but not those for their components; we are to include my ability to write this paper, but not my romantic poet's ability to write a beautiful poem; and we are to include the ability to dance, but not the ability to dance absent-mindedly. It is hard to argue about intuitions of gerrymanderedness, but I find this result unacceptable.” (Vetter, 2019, p. 217)

The second view, which ties abilities to the disposition to succeed, also faces a refutation as a universal account of abilities. It does identify abilities where the success conditions are sufficiently distinct from the basic exercise of the abilities, but it fails to include examples where the exercise of ability coincides with its success criteria. These include simple motor abilities at the least. For example, in the case of the ability to bend one's leg, the success condition, which is the manifestation component of the disposition, is identical or almost the same as its stimulus condition:

"The same kind of consideration would seem to apply quite generally to simple motor abilities: the ability to move my eyes, bend my leg, wiggle my foot, and so on. All of these performances are such that to perform them at all is already to perform them successfully. I simply have not bent my leg if my leg is not (at least a little) bent. Thus the ability to bend my leg, by (D2), should be the disposition to bend my leg well enough if I bend it at all, which is nothing but the disposition to bend my leg if I bend my leg; and so forth." (Vetter, 2019, p. 216)

Put simply, the 'success' account presupposes the distinction between a basic exercise of ability (stimulus condition) and doing it well (manifestation), yet this distinction is canceled when performing the simplest abilities, making it inapplicable to such cases. A universal account of abilities should be able to explain why we also call those cases abilities.

In summary, Vetter's critique shows us that dominant conceptions of the dispositional understanding of abilities are restrictive, each in its own way. They fail to include in the category of ability cases that are obviously exercises of abilities.

Vetter's critique emphasizes the need for a more nuanced understanding of abilities—one that does not reduce them merely to intentions or success but allows for dormant capacities that may not be explicitly linked to either. This is particularly important when analyzing Searle's Background, which consists of foundational abilities and capacities that often operate without conscious intent or awareness, and whose success criteria and exercise seem indistinguishable.

4. Abilities as Dispositions

As mentioned earlier, to determine what kinds of dispositions are abilities, we must determine the nature of their stimulus condition as well as their manifestation.

Acknowledging and building on Vetter's criticism, I propose that abilities, and by extension the Background, can be understood as dispositions

whose manifestation is positively adaptive, extraphysiological behavior, and where the stimulus condition is an object, event, or environment that prompts the individual to exhibit the said behavior, or more precisely, an opportunity.

This definition aligns with two central features of abilities: (1) that abilities are functional capacities that, when exercised under suitable conditions, typically support the agent's engagement with the environment, and (2) that abilities are not simply physiological or physical processes, but involve extraphysiological behavioral responsiveness shaped by context.³ Although a physiological process accompanies and underpins an exercise of an ability, an ability involves the mental engagement of the actor. As the analysis of the Background suggests, as well as Vetter's considerations, the psychic aspect of an ability doesn't need to be directly observable by the actor; rather, it can operate below the threshold of consciousness.

In addition to being consistent with these intuitions, my dispositional account of ability is immune to the aforementioned counterexamples that Vetter has raised to the dominant dispositional models of ability described. Namely, I propose that for something to be an ability, it is necessary and sufficient to establish that a) it generally contributes to one of these three tasks: the survival and reproduction of the organism, and its harmonious integration with the environment, and b) that it is not a purely physiological, i.e., physical process. Aimless walking, creative artistic processes, simple unconscious motor actions, etc., satisfy these requirements to a greater or lesser extent.

The definition that I propose excludes, I argue, behavior with typically negative consequences as an exercise of an ability, as well as purely physiological or physical processes. We are reluctant to say that atoms have an ability to bond, that bacteria have an ability to metabolize glucose, that plants have an ability to perform photosynthesis, or that an animal has an ability to grow hair, regardless of the fact that these processes contribute to their survival, reproduction, or integration with their environment. We would use some other term to describe such properties where a "positive adaptation" is a candidate.

3 While the definition emphasizes the functional nature of abilities, it does not claim that abilities are inherently valuable or always lead to successful outcomes. This is not a normative claim but a structural one: abilities are capacities that tend to lead to functional engagement when environmental conditions permit. In this sense, an ability can exist even if it fails to manifest, due to constraints in the environment. Thus, the dispositional model adopted here does not exclude or contradict the view that ability is co-defined by agent and environment—it simply analyzes the structural form of those capacities.

Additionally, maladaptive behaviors, like hazardous gambling⁴, are often called disabilities rather than abilities. For the most part, we don't consider them abilities precisely because they are not beneficial for the one who does them.

Temptations to consider such actions as abilities stem from the fact that many, perhaps all, maladaptive behaviors include sub-actions that are, in and of themselves, positive adaptations or lead to beneficial outcomes for the agent or organism. For instance, gambling when the odds are against the player consists of subtasks like walking, being still for a while, recognizing shapes and colors, speaking a language, and so on. These simple and more complex actions are, considered individually, abilities. However, the complex action of high-risk gambling, and similar activities, is not an ability due to no net positive adaptive effect.

We may say that such inferences, like inferring that high-risk gambling is an ability, represent a fallacy of composition. In this way, based on the positively adaptive value of the constitutive sub-abilities, it is concluded that the encompassing action is an ability. But, we have no right to conclude based on the fact that some parts or steps of a complex action are abilities that the whole series of actions as a collective can be considered an ability.

Conclusion

The goal of this research paper was to determine whether a dispositional reading of the Background can be obtained. I found this to be possible since background powers are abilities and since abilities can be interpreted as dispositions. The main takeaway from this paper is that background powers or, more broadly, abilities are dispositions to behave in a positively adaptive, not purely physiological or physical mechanical manner when opportunities arise.

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4 By this i mean risk-taking activity whose expected utility is lower than abstaining from it. The image of a broke person playing roulette should come to mind. Therefore, not all risk-taking is considered a disability—only those cases in which the expected utility is lower than that of abstaining from it. For example, quitting one's job in the hope of finding a new, better one could be understood as an ability in certain contexts.

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