

An object's dispositions or causal powers are its features which are typified by the kinds of states of affairs they tends to bring about given the right circumstances—for instance, the solubility of some sample of salt, say, is a disposition which tends to manifest as the dissolution of that salt when it is placed in a suitable solvent, such as water.

There is increasing interest, at least in philosophical circles, in the place of dispositions in ontology, as well as in how and to what extent taking dispositions seriously can shed light on problems in various areas of inquiry such as the philosophy of science and the philosophy of mind. At least one formal ontology, namely BFO, aspires to accommodate dispositions.

However, there is little agreement as to the underlying nature of dispositions. One controversy involves whether dispositions are single- or multi-track; that is, whether each disposition has only one manifestation type, or whether a single disposition can be directed towards a number of distinct manifestations. Another is focussed on how dispositions operate: whether a lone disposition manifests when triggered by the presence of a suitable 'stimulus' or 'trigger', or whether dispositions operate mutually such that several dispositions must 'work together' to bring about a particular manifestation.

These distinctions can be cross combined to frame four distinct accounts of the nature of dispositions. This talk will examine the ramifications of these different accounts for how dispositions are identified, individuated and modelled. It will also draw out some implications the different accounts have for how empirical data about dispositions should be interpreted.