



Positionality and Pictures

Author(s): Nelson Goodman

Source: *The Philosophical Review*, Oct., 1960, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Oct., 1960), pp. 523-525

Published by: Duke University Press on behalf of Philosophical Review

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/2183486>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Duke University Press and are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Philosophical Review*

POSITIONALITY AND PICTURES

L UCKILY we need not bother with the artistic *dramatis personae*, the talk of extrasensory perception, or the other embellishments of the preceding paper by Barker and Achinstein.¹ The only serious question is whether the authors succeed in defining the distinction between positional and non-positional predicates. In substance, the formulation they propose is this: a single picture or representation can be given for all instances of application of a non-positional predicate, while at least two different representations are needed to cover all instances of application of a positional predicate. For example, a single present patch of green paint will represent the color of all green things irrespective of their dates; but two present patches will be needed to represent all grue things: a green one for cases up to time t and a blue one for cases thereafter.

The limitations upon what can represent what are far from obvious. We often see black-and-white diagrams in which different colors are represented by different shadings: say green by cross-hatching, blue by dotting, and so forth. Plainly symbols like these can equally well be used for grue. Vertical shading, say, for what is green up to time t or blue thereafter is as legitimate a representation of grue as the other symbols are of green and blue. Presumably Barker and Achinstein will reject such diagramming as not the natural representation they have in mind. Just what, then, constitutes representation within their meaning? To stipulate that a color must be represented by a sample of it will not do; for a present patch of paint that is a sample of green is also a sample of grue. And if we deny that grue is a single color we are in effect merely saying that grue is positional, and so begging the question. Does representation perhaps require, then, that the color of an object be represented by another object that is indiscriminable from, or matches, the first in color? This will not work either; for then a patch of green paint, since it matches very few green things, cannot represent the color of all green things.²

¹ I am indebted to the authors for showing me their manuscript before publication.

² "Grue" might be classed as positional on the ground that its instances of application before t cannot match those after t in color, while this does not hold for "green." Noam Chomsky pointed this out to me a couple of years ago, but did not publish it because it is too *ad hoc* to be of much interest. Other clearly non-projectible color predicates that are not positional by this

At this point Barker and Achinstein may say that while precise definition of what they mean by representation is difficult, all they have in mind is ordinary, everyday, realistic representation, and that this notion is clear enough without definition. They are saying, then, that so long as only accustomed modes of representation—only common and familiar representational devices—are used, a non-positional predicate is one such that there is a single time-indifferent representation for all its instances of application. But if one is willing to put the matter thus, relying upon restriction to a familiar representational vocabulary, representation need not be brought in at all. “Grue” can be classed as positional on the ground that in terms of ordinary, familiar language, no one term describes the color of all grue objects; two different ordinary words, “green” and “blue,” are needed. This, however, depends entirely upon “green” and “blue” rather than “grue” happening to belong to ordinary language; that is, it depends entirely upon the facts of habit or entrenchment. In resting their definition of positionality upon a restriction to the most accustomed means of representation, Barker and Achinstein are making much the same appeal to entrenchment but in a more roundabout and covert way. They are not offering a new alternative.

Furthermore, the line between natural and artificial representation can hardly be so drawn as to support the use these authors want to make of it. This becomes glaringly apparent in the final paragraphs of their paper. As a time-indifferent representation for “conducts electricity,” they suggest a picture showing a battery connected by wires to an ammeter with its pointer indicating a flow of current. That this is clearly a representation for “conducts electricity” rather than for “is a closed circuit” or “is a live battery” or “is an operating meter,” or the like, is highly implausible. Even aside from that, unless the word “ammeter” or some equivalent expression is included in the picture, by what means is the meter pictured shown to be an ammeter rather than a thermometer or a meter registering the remaining hours of life in the battery or the loss of current in transmission? But if verbal inscriptions are admissible in a picture, we can construct a representation for “conducts electricity” simply by labelling the pictured meter “b-meter” for an easily made instrument whose pointer rests elsewhere than at zero up to time t when a current passes through and

criterion are easily constructed; and the criterion is inapplicable where, as in the case of “conducts electricity,” matching is irrelevant. Barker and Achinstein, in correspondence, reject this possible formulation of their proposal.

POSITIONALITY

thereafter when no current passes through (or we can replace “b-meter” by the description in familiar terms just given). Any claim that this is a less natural or admissible representation for “condulates electricity” than the original picture is for “conducts electricity” would be rather absurd. Perhaps with enough ingenuity an unambiguous representation of an ammeter could be achieved without use of a word or even of dial figures; but such ingenuity would hardly falter at representing a b-meter without use of words or figures, especially after one had been produced.

Accordingly, it seems to me that the authors succeed neither in defining positionality nor in showing that anything in *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast* needs modification.

NELSON GOODMAN

University of Pennsylvania