

Philosophy 101

9.3.13

The Status of Color

Two Positions on Color

Eliminativism/Subjectivism: Colors are not qualities of physical objects (Eliminativism). If they are qualities of anything, they are qualities of conscious mental states or objects (Subjectivism).

Realism: Colors are qualities of physical objects. They exist independently of any subject which might experience them.

Galileo's Eliminativism

To excite in us tastes, odors, and sounds I believe that nothing is required in external bodies except shapes, numbers, and slow or rapid movements. If ears, and tongues, and noses were removed, shapes and numbers and motions would remain, but not odors or tastes or sounds. The latter, I believe, are nothing more than names when separated from living beings, just as tickling and titillation are nothing but names in the absence of such things as noses and armpits (Assayer, p. 276-7).

Contemporary Eliminativism/Subjectivism

Color is a psychological property of our visual experiences when we look at objects and lights, not a physical property of those objects or lights. (Stephen Palmer, Vision Science, p. 95)

There may be light of different wavelengths independent of an observer, but there is no color independent of an observer, because color is a psychological phenomenon that arises only within an observer. (Palmer, p. 97)

The Argument from Causation

- ① Physical objects (this includes gasses and liquids) have various microphysical properties, which determine how they reflect light
- ② Reflectance properties plus facts about the visual system completely explain our experience of color
- ③ Any perceivable property, including color, must do some work in the causal explanation of experiences involving it
- ④ But all that is needed for the explanation of color experiences are microphysical properties that determines an object's reflectance
- ⑤ \therefore Color properties are causally/explanatorily idle
- ⑥ \therefore Physical object do not have color properties, but rather only reflectance properties

Problems for Eliminativism

- ① Attributes widespread error to commonsense descriptions of the world. Statements like the following would be false:
 - “The lecturn is brown”
 - “The firetruck is red”
- ② Assumes that color properties cannot be identified with those physical properties which *do* causally explain our color experiences (e.g. reflectance)

An Alternative to Eliminativism?

Primary Qualities: Intrinsic qualities of bodies (e.g. solidity, extensions, size, shape)

Secondary Qualities: Powers of bodies, determined by their primary qualities, to produce sensations in perceiving subjects (e.g. colors, sounds, tastes)

Two senses of “color”

- Distinguish between two notions of color:
 - color as a property of physical bodies
 - color as a property of color experiences (i.e. ‘color-as-we-see-it’ or ‘phenomenal color’).
 - Phenomenal colors are not properties of physical bodies
 - We would be making an error if we attributed phenomenal colors to physical bodies

Colors as Secondary Qualities

- Colors are properties of physical bodies in the sense of being secondary qualities of bodies
 - Colors are powers of bodies to produce color experiences in perceiving subjects
 - Bodies are colored in the sense of having a property which causes color sensations of a particular kind in normal perceivers under normal conditions

Are Secondary Qualities Objective?

- Colors are 'real' or 'objective' in the sense that:
 - judgments of color might be true/false
 - color perception within (e.g.) a species may be similar

Are Secondary Qualities Objective?

- Colors are 'subjective' in the sense that:
 - the truth of a color judgment may be relative to the kind of subject making the judgment
 - the color things appear to have is highly relative to the perceptual apparatus of the perceiving subject
 - the analysis of color judgments (e.g. 'grass is green') must be understood in terms of 'looks' statements (e.g. 'grass looks green under normal conditions') which seems to go against our linguistic practice of learning to use color language

How Do We Know?

- What argument can we use to distinguish primary from secondary qualities?
 - conceivability arguments
 - relativity arguments

Williams on Objectivity

Objectivity and Knowledge

if knowledge is what it claims to be, then it is knowledge of a reality which exists independently of that knowledge, and indeed (except for the special case where the reality known happens itself to be some psychological item) independently of any thought or experience. Knowledge is of what is there anyway (Williams, 48)

Objectivity and Knowledge

Independence Condition on Knowledge: For a subject matter to count as knowable its existence must be independent of the subject who might come to know it

Can we have knowledge of secondary qualities? — are they the kinds of things that are ‘there anyway’?

- depends on what is meant by ‘independent’

The Absolute Conception

Suppose A and B each claims to have some knowledge of the world. Each has some beliefs, and moreover has experiences of the world, and ways of conceptualizing it, which have given rise to those beliefs and are expressed in them: let us call all of this together his representation of the world (or part of the world). Now with respect to their supposed pieces of knowledge, A's and B's representations may well differ. If what they both have is knowledge, then it seems to follow that there must be some coherent way of understanding why these representations differ, and how they are related to one another (Williams, 49).

The Absolute Conception

- ① Knowledge is a kind of representation of the world
- ② Representations of same parts of the world can differ in a variety of ways (e.g. in perspective, medium, etc.)
- ③ If a representation is to count as knowledge we need an explanation of how it 'fits' with other (possible) representations
- ④ \therefore A full explanation of how some representation counts as knowledge requires our possession of an 'absolute' representation of the world which explains why other kinds of representations get to count as knowledge

Primary Qualities and the Absolute Conception

- Some ways of apprehending the world depend on peculiarities of the subject (e.g. their belief system, their visual system, etc.)
 - the world 'as it seems'
 - the world as reflected by 'local interests, tastes or sensory peculiarities'
- Some ways of apprehending the world are free of any such peculiarity of the subject
 - the world 'as it really is'

Primary Qualities and the Absolute Conception

- ① The absolute conception of the world is a conception of the world maximally free of the peculiarities of any subject's representation of the world
- ② Primary qualities are qualities of the world that do not depend on the peculiarities of perceiving subjects
- ③ \therefore Primary qualities are part of the absolute conception

Secondary Qualities and the Absolute Conception

- ① The absolute conception of the world is a conception of the world maximally free of the peculiarities of any subject's representation of the world
- ② Secondary qualities are relative to the peculiarities of perceiving subjects
- ③ \therefore Secondary qualities are not part of the absolute conception of the world

The Reality of Secondary Qualities

- The absolute conception must explain how representation of secondary qualities comes about
 - secondary qualities are real but *derivative* features of the world
- Only primary qualities are objectively real. Secondary qualities have their reality only insofar as they are properties of primary qualities
- The representations of secondary qualities (e.g. 'sensations') are not at all like the features of objects (the secondary qualities) that they represent