

### Lecture 3: The missing explanation argument

Johnston, Mark (1998), 'Are Manifest Qualities Response-Dependent?' *The Monist* 81(1), pp. 3-43.

#### A primary/secondary distinction

Recall, we can construct true, necessary and a priori bi-conditionals of the form:

x is Q iff for any S: if S were perceptually normal and were to encounter x in perceptually normal conditions, S would experience or judge x to be Q

For some attributes (e.g. being square), such biconditionals are trivial because the normal conditions will include the fact that x is Q or will have to be defined as 'whatever conditions make experiencing x as Q dependent on x being Q'. This implies that the claim that *to be square is just to be disposed to look square in the relevant conditions* is problematically circular.

But for other attributes (e.g. being red), such biconditionals are not trivial: the normal conditions do here not include the fact that x is Q, and they allow for a definition that is more neutral than 'whatever conditions make experiencing x as Q dependent on x being Q'. This implies that the claim that *to be red is just to be disposed to look red in the relevant conditions* is not problematically circular. (This is why a dispositionalism about colour seems to require a response-dependent analysis of colour concepts.)

If this is right, then observational concepts like 'red' differ from observational concepts like 'square'. Why is this? Wright suggests that judgments about being red, when formed in the right circumstances, determine the extension of the concept, whereas judgements about being square can at best track the concept's extension:

The proposal is that the beliefs, if any, which we (would) have formed, or will or would form, under the relevant C-conditions, *serve to determine the extension* of the concept red. And this claim is to be understood by contrast with the thought that such beliefs *keep track* of an extension which is independently determined.

As we could now put it: a concept is response-dependent iff its extension is determined by specific responses to objects under relevant conditions. This allows us to circumscribe a class of sensible qualities: Q is a secondary quality iff our concept of Q is response dependent.

This conceptual distinction helps us see that the secondary qualities are, at least conceptually, tied to our senses in a way primary qualities are not: their extension is determined by sensory responses under relevant conditions (see also: Pasnau 'A Theory of Secondary Qualities', 2006).

#### Concepts and explanation

But are our colour concepts really response-dependent concepts? Any theory of secondary qualities that defines these qualities in terms of properties of our concepts of those qualities should be compatible with the properties that our concepts of those qualities in fact have.

One of the properties our concepts of secondary qualities have is that they allow for true empirical explanations of our sensory responses to those qualities: an object looks red, in normal conditions, because it is red. That this apple is red is a perfectly good explanation for why it looks red to me, now, and under these viewing conditions.

Is it obvious that these two assumptions are really compatible?

- A. It is a priori that x is red iff x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions
- B. There can be true empirical explanations of the form "x looks red because it is red"

## Sensing and perceiving

Imagine: there's a precious gem fixed to the wall of an underwater cave, and every normal perceiving subject who swims down and illuminates the gem so as to produce normal illumination conditions is disposed to see the stone as deep red (Johnston 1998). If some swimmers genuinely saw the colour of the gem, then the stone would look deep red to them *because* it is deep red.

We know that not every deep-red-experience arises in this way: sometimes lighting conditions are abnormal and blue things cause deep-red-experiences, sometimes deep-red-experiences are drug-induced. However, in the Underwater Cave, it is because the stone is in fact red that it looks red to them. We have an instance of a perfectly ordinary empirical explanation.

The availability of this type of empirical explanation is entailed by the assumption that we sense or perceive the colours. More generally, it is part of our concepts of sensible qualities that we can sense or perceive instances of such qualities. Sensing and perceiving are both exercises of a kind of *receptivity* to the world. Mark Johnston (1998) elaborates this point:

Sensing and perceiving are both capacities to respond to objects and their qualities. These capacities are "forms of receptivity" to objects and their qualities. That is, the relevant responses are *reliably dependent* on how things are, in the sense that these necessary conditions hold for sensing and perceiving:

Subjects are able to sense a family of qualities had by a range of objects only if this empirical generalization holds of them: each of the subjects has a disposition which in standard conditions issues in the appearing of an object having some of the qualities (i) just when the object in fact has these qualities and (ii) partly because the object has these qualities.

Subjects are able to perceive a family of qualities had by a range of objects only if this empirical generalization holds of them: each of the subjects has a disposition which in standard conditions issues in the immediate perceptual belief that an object has some of the qualities (i) just when the object in fact has these qualities and (ii) partly because the object has these qualities.

## Missing explanation

We can now show that the response-dependent analysis of our concepts of secondary qualities evaporates a perfectly sound explanation. The argument exploits the following: "The light bulb suddenly went out because the light bulb suddenly went out" is necessarily not a true empirical explanation. Any 'explanation' of this form is an explanatory solecism, i.e. a non-explanation.

The argument can be presented as follows:

1. It is a priori that x is red iff x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions (Response-dependence)
2. For some x, x is disposed to look red to perceptually normal observers in perceptually normal conditions because x is red (Underwater cave)
3. For any x and any F, it is not the case that x is F because x is F (Explanatory solecism)
4. If it is a priori that x is red iff x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions and if for some x, x is disposed to look red to perceptually normal observers in perceptually normal conditions because x is red, then for some x, x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions because x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions (Substitution principle)
5. For some x, x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions because x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions (from 1,2,4)
6. It is not the case that for some x, x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions because x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions (from 3)
7. Contradiction (from 5,6)

If we accept the more general assumptions about explanation and substitution, then this argument presents a dilemma: either our colour concepts are not response-dependent, which threatens colour dispositionalism; or we cannot explain our colour experience in terms of the possession of colour, which means that, given that the availability of such an explanation is entailed by the assumption that we sense or perceive its colour, we must deny that we sense or perceive colour.