QUALITIES | Lent 2019 | Maarten Steenhagen (ms2416)
http://msteenhagen.github.io/teaching/2019qua/

Lecture 2: **Dispositionalism and response-dependence**

Crispin Wright (1988), 'Moral Values, Projection, and Secondary Qualities,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 62 (supplementary volume), pp. 1-26.

Metaphysics of colour

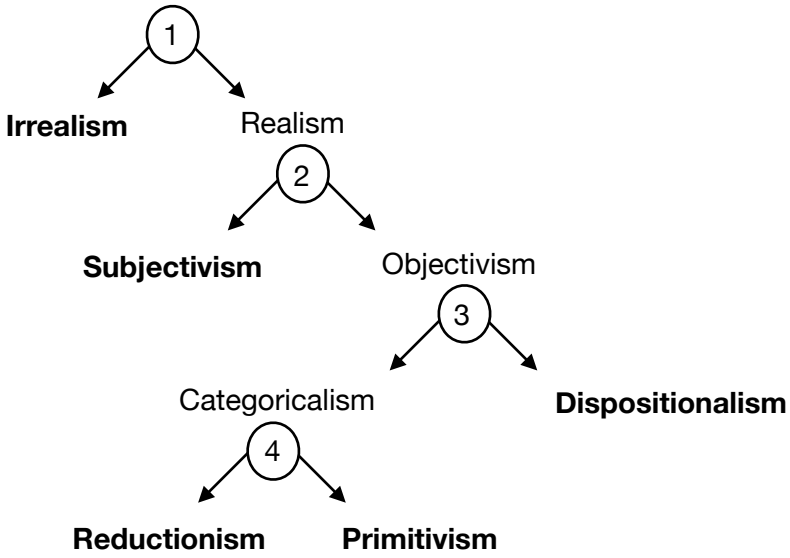
There are many ways of drawing up a map of the metaphysics of colour. But the following is conventional. 1. Are there any colours? 2. If so, are the colours objective attributes? 3. If so, are the colours categorical attributes? 4. If so, are the colours reducible to some other kind of attribute?

This taxonomy does not just work for debates about colour but for debates about qualities more generally (e.g. ethical values, aesthetic qualities, funniness).

But for the case of colour, it seems natural to make the following assumptions:

1. We can perceive colours
2. What it is like to perceive a colour somehow reveals the nature of the colour

This rules out a number of positions. Irrealism and subjectivism conflict with (1). Irrealism and reductionism conflict with (2). This leaves a choice between primitivism and dispositionalism.



Colours as dispositions

Dispositionalism about colour tries to harmonise subjectivist intuitions with a realist outlook: on the one hand colours are essentially *visual* qualities, on the other hand colours belong to the surfaces of objects. The central dispositionalist idea is that to be coloured is to cause a typical sort of visual response. You see the apple, it looks red to you: this experience (looking red) is caused by the apple. This is why we judge the apple to be red, and not blue or green.

The dispositional analysis claims that colours are dispositional qualities:

> *x* is red iff *x* is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions

This defines 'red' in terms of 'looking red'. Isn't this circular? Not if we think of our concept of red as response-dependent. Response dependent concepts exhibit "a conceptual dependence on or interdependence with concepts of our responses in certain specific conditions" (Johnston, 'Dispositional Theories of Value' 1989, p. 145). The idea is that we have a prior grasp of what it is for something to look red, and understand what it is for something to be red in terms of it.

The reference to normal observers and normal circumstances is ineliminable. If 'looking red' is conceptually prior to being red, then it is conceivable that, say, the distinctive experience of looking red is sometimes caused by something blue. It is part of our concept of red that only normal perceivers and normal conditions are appropriate for determining whether something is red. The idea here is that in those circumstances our (sincere) judgments about colour will be authoritative and true.

A primary/secondary distinction in the making?

Does the dispositional analysis help us say what is distinctive of the colours, as secondary qualities? Not obviously. Consider that many paradigm primary qualities allow us to construct very similar biconditionals. Take *being square*.

> *x* is square iff *x* is disposed to look (or feel) square to normal observers in normal conditions

To draw a primary/secondary distinction, it seems that colour dispositionalism needs to say that there is *no more* to being coloured than being disposed to cause certain visual experiences; colours have an exclusively dispositional nature. This would contrast with primary qualities such as squareness, which are typically understood as categorical. Perhaps they do want to say this.

However, the claim is controversial. Lewis (1997) argues that having a disposition entails having a certain sort of intrinsic property, i.e. some causal basis for the relevant response. (This overcomes the problem of 'finkish dispositions'.) For colour the following seems more attractive: redness (the quality) is the causal basis for the disposition to cause specific visual experiences in us, so that being red is not exclusively dispositional, but entails a categorical nature as well (see John Campbell, 'A simple view of colour', 1997).

Observational concepts and normal conditions

Crispin Wright ('Moral Values, Projection and Secondary Qualities',1988) agrees that for both primary and secondary qualities, we can construct true 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 x as Q

These bi-conditionals are not only true, but also seem knowable a priori to someone who has a grasp of the concept Q, providing it is observational (i.e. a concept of a sensible quality).

For example, if I have the concept of red, I can know a priori that if this apple were red and if conditions were normal, I would experience this apple as red. A similar thing holds for the observational concept 'square'. I can know a priori that if this table top were square and if conditions were normal, I would experience it as square. So to that extent our concepts of primary and secondary qualities are on a par.

Red vs Square

However, the biconditional associated with 'red' expresses a non-trivial conceptual truth: whatever looks red in normal conditions is red. The biconditional for 'being square' does not do this. If it is a priori, then it expresses only a trivial claim. This point is subtle, and turns on what is involved in our grasp of the conditions that are normal for the observational concept in question. Imagine judging whether something is red or square.

Someone who understands 'red' already has a grasp of what conditions need to be met for her judgment 'x is red' to be authoritative and true. Those conditions have to do with overall circumstances, her perceptual apparatus, attentiveness etc. Crucially, one can possess a (tacit) grasp of such normal conditions without yet knowing the colour of the object one is looking at.

The situation for 'square' is very different. What are the normal conditions that make perceptual judgments of squareness authoritative and true? Consider, any typical square-experience is compatible with a number of different shapes. Some trapeziums may 'look square' in this way. Or consider the possibility of shape-shifters: objects that are not square but that do always present the characteristic visual aspect of square things. An ignorant subject encountering a shape-shifter will judge that she sees a square, because the shape-shifter is from each angle she views is visually indistinguishable from a square.

For our judgments about squares under normal conditions to be authoritative and true, we need to specify these conditions in a way that rules out the presence of shape-shifters. This requires us to understand them as conditions in which things that look square are in fact square.

Though it is a conceptual truth that whatever looks square in such conditions is square, it is a trivial one, for it amounts to saying that whatever looks square in conditions when things that look square are square, is square. The primary/secondary distinction shows up at the conceptual level.