

## CHAPTER 4

### IDENTIFYING COLORS: RELATIONALLY SPECIFYING A NONRELATIONAL PROPERTY<sup>1</sup>

When we're asked "What do 'red', 'blue', 'black', 'white', mean?" we can, of course, immediately point to things which have these colours, - but that's all we can do: our ability to explain their meaning goes no further.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1977: III-102)

It is obvious, Pollyanna thinks, that we typically identify the colors of objects by observation. Moreover, we teach others to identify colors by getting them to notice certain features that they visually experience. If that's what we typically do, then we *can* do it and it is obvious that we can. That's why Pollyanna takes the following to be a truism:

(D1) *x* is blue if and only if *x* would appear blue to normal observers under normal conditions.

The intuition that D1 is true, an intuition that many philosophers share with Pollyanna, is perhaps the principal motivation for thinking that colors are dispositional properties of objects, viz., the property of being disposed to appear a certain way. But our work in the last chapter may have weakened that

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this chapter are taken from my (1994) and I thank *Philosophical Studies* for permission to use that article here. My views have changed considerably over the past few years, however. The most important difference between this chapter and my (1994) is that when I wrote my (1994) I thought of colors as relational properties of objects, a position I now disown. I was then merely a Pollyanna Realist in training. Another difference is that I then viewed my position as being an alternative to, and incompatible with, McGinn's (1983). I now see it as largely in league with McGinn (though not in league with his more recent venture (1996) (see §9 below)).

motivation given that dispositional properties are generally thought to be relational properties, i.e., given that accounts like D1 are generally understood as attempts to reduce something's being blue to its being such that it would appear blue. Nonetheless, Pollyanna insists that there's something about D1 worth saving. I think she's right. Indeed, I think that colors are dispositional properties. Dispositionalism, I argue, is correct. But dispositional properties are not relational properties.

I'll take Dispositionalism to be the view that an object's color is *essentially tied* to how that object would appear. So, minimally, Dispositionalism holds that, necessarily, something is blue if and only if it would appear a certain way under certain conditions. And I'll understand a dispositional specification of colors to be one that specifies or identifies the color an object has by appeal to how that object would appear. Thus understood, Dispositionalism and dispositional specifications make separate, though compatible, claims. We might, for instance, favor a dispositional specification of colors – indeed, we might think that there is no other way (or no better way) to specify the colors of objects – without thinking that an object's color is essentially tied to how it would appear. For example, we might think that blueness is the categorical ground of the disposition to appear blue. If it were, then we could identify the instantiations of blueness by looking for the instantiations of a particular dispositional property even if that dispositional property is not identical to its categorical ground. Dispositionalism, however, is a metaphysical position. It purports to tell us what colors are and not merely how we might identify them. Indeed, we might even endorse Dispositionalism and reject dispositional specifications. We might, for instance, think that some property is a dispositional property, but believe there is no way to specify what that property is. Or we might think that the instantiation of a particular dispositional property is "finkish"; we might think, in other words, that the dispositional property would no longer be instantiated under the conditions generally appropriate for the disposition to be manifested.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I develop and defend a dispositional specification of colors according to which an object's color is *identified* by certain relational features of that object. But I argue for more: an object's color is essentially tied to how it would appear under appropriate conditions. Colors are, I contend,

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<sup>2</sup> See C.B. Martin (1994) and §8 below.

dispositional properties of objects. My project is thus metaphysical, not merely epistemological. Consequently, since the identification conditions for colors that I develop in this chapter must do metaphysical work (i.e., since I claim to be rediscovering *colors* and not merely rediscovering how we discover them), merely providing the truth conditions for something's being some color is insufficient. You have every reason to be nervous at this point. Even Pollyanna is made insecure. After all, if dispositional properties are relational properties, then Dispositionalism falls to the same objections we raised against other relational accounts in the last chapter. In Chapter 5 I argue, however, that dispositional properties are not relational properties, though they are specified relationally. They are specified, I maintain, by their essential causal features – by the causal powers they necessarily contribute to anything having them. They are not, however, identical to those features.

Dispositionalism might find comfort from the challenges raised in the last two chapters, though we should keep in mind that thus far we have no reason to think that Dispositionalism is any more serious (semantically, epistemically, or ontologically) than its competitors. I will show that Dispositionalism is ontologically serious in Chapter 5. Before showing how we can be ontologically serious about dispositions, however, we need to develop an account that is at least semantically and epistemically serious. In other words, assuming for the moment that dispositions can play the appropriate causal roles, we need a way to pick out the right dispositions – i.e., we need a way to identify colors. And providing that account – providing an account that identifies the right dispositions (the colors) – immediately brings us against two obstacles. The first obstacle is an empirical consideration: an object's apparent color might (and sometimes will) change radically from one normal condition to another or from one normal observer to another. If this is true, and we assume that nothing can be both blue and some other color simultaneously, it follows that D1 is false. The second obstacle is that it has proven notoriously difficult to provide a dispositional account of colors that is neither non-circular nor ontologically promiscuous. Either we identify something's being blue by appeal to the way blue things look (and this is circular), or else the identification relies on intrinsic properties of experience (and this is promiscuous because it tells us how to identify colors only by adding to our ontology another property). These two difficulties form the basis for several recent and influential criticisms of Dispositionalism (cf. Averill (1985), Hilbert

(1987), Hardin (1988), and Boghossian and Velleman (1989)), and they have occupied the lion's share of much recent work on Dispositionalism (cf. McGinn (1983), Peacocke (1983, 1984), and Watkins (1994)). My primary aim in this chapter is to resolve these two difficulties.

Another problem – *the other problem* – will remain, of course. Pollyanna is made especially nervous by the reductive feel of the account offered in this chapter. She worries in particular that the account fails to be ontologically serious because, at least on the surface, it seems to treat colors as relational and modal features of objects. I've promised Pollyanna – as I've promised you – that my account is not reductive and it does not treat colors as relational properties. Pollyanna isn't convinced and she's sure she's not alone. I'll return to Pollyanna's worry (and perhaps yours) towards the end of the chapter, and it will occupy us for all of Chapter 5.

## 1. TWO PROBLEMS FOR DISPOSITIONAL SPECIFICATIONS

### 1.1 *An Empirical Complication*

As Hardin makes clear, certain empirical considerations challenge the truth of D1. For instance, some objects appear one color under north daylight, but appear a different color under direct sunlight (1988: 70).<sup>3</sup> For most, we may assume, both of these conditions are normal for judging the colors of most objects. Furthermore, some objects would be judged blue in daylight by many of the observers we treat as normal, and judged bluish-green by others. That is because visual systems, like hat sizes, vary slightly from one human being to another. The threat to D1, then, is that we might have no non-arbitrary way to determine which of these conditions, or which of these observers, is *normal*.<sup>4</sup>

We can state these challenges, what I will call the 'No-Preference Theses' (or 'NPT'), as NPT(1) and NPT(2) below.

*NPT(1)* In some cases where two viewing conditions, C and C', are such that some object looks to be one color to normal observers in C, but a different color to normal observers in C':

<sup>3</sup> Also see W.D. Wright (1972) and Günter Wyszecki and W.S. Stiles (1982).

<sup>4</sup> An alternative account of colors might appeal to optimal conditions and/or ideal observers. I'll discuss this strategy in detail in Chapter 6.

- a) no rational basis exists for preferring either C or C' as *the* normal condition; and,
- b) no rational basis exists for preferring any other condition as *the* normal condition over either C or C'.

*NPT(2)* In some cases where two observers, S and S', are such that some object is judged to be one color in normal conditions by S, but judged differently by S':

- a) no rational basis exists for preferring S or S' as *the* normal observer; and,
- b) no rational basis exists for preferring any other observer as *the* normal observer over either S or S'.

Both NPT(1) and NPT(2), I will argue, are true. Unfortunately, either NPT(1) or NPT(2), when conjoined with D1, entails the possibility that some objects are simultaneously two (or more) colors all over. This violates what many take to be a necessary truth, which is often called 'the Color Incompatibility Claim,' i.e., no object can simultaneously *be* two different colors all over. (Hereafter I'll capitalize 'Color Incompatibility Claim' when referring to the claim that nothing can simultaneously *be* two colors all over. There are other color incompatibility claims, however. When referring to those or to the entire family of color incompatibility claims I will use the lower case 'c' and 'i'.) We are faced, then, with a trilemma. Either we abandon D1 (an apparent truism), or NPT (which enjoys considerable empirical support), or the Incompatibility Claim (a purportedly necessary truth).

The dispositional specification of colors I develop in this chapter contains D1. Further, I acknowledge and defend the truth of NPT. Thus, I grab the third horn of the trilemma. I deny the truth (not just the *necessity*) of the Incompatibility Claim. This seems a high price to pay, but as we later see there are at least two color incompatibility claims. I will urge that though the Color Incompatibility Claim is false, a different but related incompatibility claim can be preserved.

Before addressing the Incompatibility Claim, however, I must first provide a specification of colors compatible with the truth of D1. Here we face the second problem with which we began, viz., offering a dispositional specification of colors that simultaneously avoids circularity and ontological promiscuity.



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