

Explaining Objective Color
in Terms of Subjective Reactions

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1. WHY OBJECTIVE COLOUR SHOULD BE EXPLAINED IN TERMS OF SUBJECTIVE REACTIONS

Many of the salient facts about colour can be explained only in terms of our own perceptual mechanisms.

We have a biological explanation of these facts in terms of Shepherd's evolutionary account (in terms of the variation in natural illumination over the course of the day).

A. We identify the objective property redness with the tendency to be perceived *as red* under standard conditions.

2. COLOUR SENSATIONS

If there are red colour sensations, then they are not red in the same sense in which objects are red — they do not produce certain reactions in perceivers, they cannot be “viewed” and they are supposed to be the effects of viewing red objects, not the causes of them.

2.1 OBJECTIVE COLOURS EXPLAINED IN TERMS OF SUBJECTIVE SENSATIONS

1. . An object is red if and only if it would give normal perceivers red* sensations under standard viewing conditions. (Note addition of red*, which results from the analysis in 2. above.)

Problems: What makes a person a normal perceiver? What makes for standard conditions?

Problem of circularity: You cannot define a normal perceiver as one who has sensation of redness under the right conditions, or the standard conditions in terms of those in which red objects produce sensations of redness.

“Let’s suppose that you can define objective standards without making reference to the property of redness itself.”

2.2 COLOUR SENSATIONS ARE BASIC.

Block etc. What makes a sensation of red* a red* sensation is its *qualitative character*, which one can define only by acts of ostension — sensations “like this”.

It follows from this that a person who has never experienced a red* sensation cannot fully understand what a redness is.

- A. An object is red if and only if it would produce in normal perceivers sensations “like this”.

2.3 VARIATIONS IN COLOR SENSATIONS

Different people might have different sensations of colours. This seems likely if:

- a. A sensation of colour is defined by—identified with— its intrinsic character
- b. The intrinsic character depends upon the exact nature of the underlying physical processes.
- c. The physical processes differ from person to person.
- d. Hence, people could have sensations with different intrinsic experiences.

It follows from this different people have different concepts of the colours, and they mean different things when they use the same colour terms.

It also follows, says Harman, that the colour terms have no meaning at all

Going back to the definition...

1. An object is red if and only if it would produce in normal perceivers sensations “like this”.

But if different people have different sensations, then there are no objects that produce the sensations “like this” in normal perceivers.

Hence there is no object that is red.

Two absurd results: People mean different things by the colour terms they use, despite using them in exactly the same way; no objects are red.

3. FUNCTIONAL DEFINITIONS OF COLOR SENSATIONS.

It is not sufficient to identify the effects of red objects by saying “sensations like this”, for any two objects could be like each other in an indefinite number of ways. It doesn’t serve to say what the similarity is between those sensations. Pointing does not fix the nature of the similarity.

One approach to picking out that similarity is a *functional definition*. This would avoid the problem of identifying the sensation with its physical realization, and instead identify it with its *functional role*.

But to give a functional definition of an internal state is to define it in terms of its causal relations to inputs, outputs and other internal states. Hence this would be a circular definition: red sensations are states *caused by red* objects...

4. COMPLICATION: THERE ARE NO COLOUR SENSATIONS

A sensation is normally a bodily feeling — a sensation of coldness , or pain, or an itch. Sensations are located in body parts. A visual sensation would thus be a sensation in one's eye. But red* sensations are not located in eye: they are that in virtue of which we see objects *as* red.

4.1 REPRESENTATIONAL CHARACTER OF PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE

When we look at an object, and see it as red, we represent it as having a specific colour property, redness. It is important to distinguish:

1. The properties which we represent the object as having — how it appears to us.
2. The properties of the representation in virtue of which it does the representing.

We don't have access to the properties of the representation itself, only to that which is represented. Hence we don't experience our own representations as red.

“It follows that your concept of a red object cannot be analyzed into your concept of a red* experience, meaning a specific quality that your perceptual experience has in order to represent objective redness, because you have no such concept of a red* experience. You have no idea what specific quality of your perceptual experience is used to represent objective redness. You have only the concept of objective redness!”

4.2 THE CONCEPT OF COLOR

“You perceive colors as **simple, primitive features of the world**, not as dispositions or complexes of other causal features.”

In other words, even though colours qua properties of the world *are* dispositional properties, we do not *perceive them to be or conceive them as being* dispositional properties. Rather, we both perceive them and conceive of them instead as simple, primitive features of the world.

Is this true? In what sense does Harman think that colours are “primitive”? One sense might be “perceptually primitive” or “perceptually foundational”—that without which the world could not be perceived. Here, certainly colours are primitive features of *pictures*; if there were no colours in a picture, then there would be no picture at all. But if a person were colour-blind, saw no colours, he or she could still see objects as light or dark.

Here it seems that Harman means something like “causally simple”—nothing explains their presence in the world (what causes them) or their causal interaction with the other states/properties of the world.

“The perceptual concept of colour might be quite simple even if color itself is a complex phenomenon.”

“...something is red if and only if it has a property R, where R is a tendency to produce experiences that represent something as Q, where Q is the concept produced by the perception of red things, where here we are using the *primitive perceptual concept red*...

How do we understand the notion of a primitive conceptual concept? Obviously not in any terms that requires the sensation of redness (for there is none) nor the property of redness (for that would be circular)? Rather, we need a notion that refers to the content of the concept, such that we can identify the concept via its contents, not its sensory origins (as caused by the sensation of redness).

“The perceptual concept of red figures as part of the perceptual experience of red objects, enabling a perceiver to identify and reidentify objects as red. In other words, if a perceptual concept is a concept Q such that one has perceptual experiences of something being Q, then (roughly speaking) we can say that the concept Q is the concept of redness if perception of red things tends to produce experiences of something being Q. “