VIII Secondary Quality Accounts

1 Colour and like concepts

We'll start with something that has a strong claim to being a secondary quality (though nothing here uncontroversial): a colour term such as 'yellow'.

The contrast is with primary qualities like shape or mass. Why the contrast? Again there is much that is controversial, but a central idea here is that colour properties are 'held together' by human (and other animal) responses in a way in which shape and mass aren't.

Two indicators of that:

(i) different objects with very different spectral reflectance properties will be perceived by normal human observers as having the same colour (there are colour metamers);

(ii) the same object will reflect very different patterns of sunlight at different times of day, but will be perceived as the keeping the same colour (we enjoy colour constancy); but under certain sorts of artificial lighting it will be perceived as having a different colour.

When we look at the physical bases of the reflectance properties, there is even greater divergence: the physical basis of the yellow of a canary's feathers, and a yellow of a photograph of those feathers, are completely different.

In short, if you want to see what the yellow things have in common you would do better looking to the human responses than to independent features of the world. And that means that if we are ever visited by aliens, while we may well be able to talk to them about shape and mass, it is very unlikely that they will have any conception of yellow.

So we might think that what is distinctive about yellow is captured by the centrality of an equation like this:

(Y) X is yellow iff X is perceived as yellow by normal observers under standard conditions.

'Normal' observers would exclude those who are colour blind etc. 'Standard' conditions would exclude fluorescent light, the wearing of rose tinted spectacles, etc. If we want this equation to give a reductive definition of 'yellow' these had better be definable in a way that doesn't just come down to 'observers who are good at perceiving yellow, in conditions that are propitious for so doing', and perhaps we can do that using notions of what what is statistically normal. (It's unclear that we have anything like a reductive definition anyway, since the term 'yellow' appears on the right-hand side as well as the left, so if someone really didn't understand what it meant, they couldn't use the equation to come to an understanding. It might best be understood as what Michael Dummett terms an 'explanatory' argument: something that enables us to get clearer on something that we already have some grip on.)

What special standing does this equation have that a corresponding one about a primary quality wouldn't have:

(T) X is triangular iff X is perceived as triangular by normal observers under standard conditions.

Some have claimed that (Y) is a priori, or is necessary, in a way in which (T) is not. But it may just be that (Y) is the best account of yellowness, whereas we can do better in defining triangularity. Concepts that are like yellow in this way are often called 'response-dependent concepts', in that they are characterized by a dependence on human responses.

There are lots of other plausible candidates for response-dependence, though we might want to adjust either the nature of the response, or the nature of the observer and conditions (or both):

> (F) X is funny iff X would be found to be funny by normal observers under standard conditions.
> (P) X is popular iff X is liked by most actual observers under actual conditions.
> (S) X is scary iff X would provoke a fear response in normal observers under standard conditions.
> (N) X is nauseating iff X would induce nausea in normal consumers under standard conditions.

Note though that none of this should suggest that there is not really any such property as being yellow (or as being funny, popular etc.). The concepts themselves are not determined by the world independently of us. But once we have them, it is an objective issue what they apply to: they have absolutely straightforward truth conditions, about which an absolutely straightforward cognitivist response can be given. And people can make mistakes in applying them. The details will depend on the details of the response. If you are in abnormal conditions, you can easily be wrong about the colour of something (witness the problem of buying clothes under fluorescent light), though it is hard to see that most people could be wrong about colour most of the time. But most people could be wrong about who is popular: everyone might be wrong about who others like.

2 Moral concepts as response-dependent concepts

How can we apply this framework to the moral? Here's a first attempt:

> (1) X is good iff X would be judged to be good by normal observers under standard conditions.

But that looks rather like simple community subjectivism. However, we can fiddle with three different parameters: the nature of the response; the nature of the observer; and the nature of the conditions.

One set of changes gives us something like Smith's approach:

> (2) X is good iff X would be desired by rational observers under conditions of full relevant information.

Or we could idealize the observer (that's the kind of thing that Adam Smith proposed, and is also there in some virtue theorists):

> (3) X is good iff X would be judged to be good by morally ideal observers under standard conditions.

Or we could change the specification of the circumstances:

(4) X is good iff X would be judged to be good by normal observers in conditions were they were impartial and disinterested.

Alternatively we could make the attitude less of a judgment (as we did above with 'scary' and 'nauseating'):

(5) X is good iff X would be approved of by normal observers under standard conditions.

or

(6) X is good iff X would evoke a positive emotional response from normal observers under standard conditions.

Such characterizations would be better placed to explain motivational internalism. It wouldn't follow automatically that anyone who made the judgment that something was good would be motivated to pursue it, since they might not themselves be normal observers under standard conditions: you might judge that normal observers would get the positive emotional response, whilst knowing that you yourself were too depressed to feel it. But nevertheless in general if most people are normal and most conditions standard, there would be a default that people making the judgments would be moved.

Alternatively we could leave things vague: if psychology is in the process of determining quite what our moral responses consist in, with what mixture of cognitive and affective states, we might just say:

(7) X is good iff X would evoke the positive moral response in normal observers under standard conditions.

3. Connections with expressivism

How does this fit with emotivism? Clearly it is a cognitive approach, so it isn't compatible with classical emotivism. You might think though that it is just what the hybrid theorist would want to enable them to fill out the cognitive dimension in their account.

But if the hybrid theorist adopted this approach, what grounds would they have for insisting on the expressive element? If the response-dependent account can explain the motivational internalism, it seems under motivated. And if people do sometimes properly use moral language without expressing any relevant affective attitude, it might seem actively mistaken.

4. Does this really give us moral realism?

It certainly seems to give us cognitivism, and it leaves space for some disagreement, learning etc. But it puts a limit on this. What it does seem to rule out is that we could be massively wrong about the moral facts in the way that we might turn out to massively wrong primary qualities (completely wrong about fundamental physics, for example). Is that a possibility that we want to leave open?