

## SECONDARY QUALITIES, SELF-LOCATING BELIEF, AND SENSIBLE RELATIVISM<sup>1</sup>

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Colors are not as real as shapes. Shapes are full-fledged qualities of things as they are in themselves, independent of how they're perceived and by whom. Colors are merely qualities of things as they are for us, and the colors of things depend on who is perceiving them. When we take the fully objective view of the world, things keep their shapes, but the colors fall away, revealed as mere artifacts of our own subjective, parochial perspective on the world.

Or so some have thought, and so it is often tempting to think, even for those of us who, at the end of the day, wind up thinking otherwise. It is even more tempting to think that, even if this is all wrong with respect to *colors*, there are *some* qualities of things that deserve the sort of treatment that colors are subjected to in the previous paragraph. Whatever we think about the case of color, there's definitely a pull to the idea of drawing some distinction between the fully real, objective, observer-independent qualities of things as they are in themselves, and the less-than-fully-real, subjective, observer-dependent qualities of things as they are for us. Standard candidates for this treatment include sensory qualities like colors, tastes, and smells, as well as comic, aesthetic, and moral qualities. Opinions differ, obviously, about which of these are *good* candidates for such treatment.

Call qualities of the first kind *primary qualities*, those of the second kind *secondary qualities*, and the distinction between them the *primary/secondary quality distinction*. This terminology is partly stipulative—I will not retract any of what follows if confronted with good textual evidence that, for example, Locke had nothing even remotely like this distinction in mind—but the choice of terminology is not arbitrary either. The (as yet intolerably vague and mushy) distinction I am after is, I think, what underlies much of the

interest of the historical distinction(s).

In any event, whatever we *call* the distinction, and whatever its relation to what people have actually said over the course of philosophical history, the distinction is philosophically interesting because it is (a) often an attractive distinction to draw, and (b) incredibly hard to spell out in a satisfying and sensible way. I attempt such a spelling-out in what follows, after first trying to pin down in more detail what we want from the primary/secondary quality distinction, and saying a little bit about why that's such a hard thing to get.

### 1. *The Job Description*

There is a lot of rhetoric that suggests the sort of distinction inadequately characterized above. I will attempt to pin down the distinction a bit more carefully by looking at some of the rhetoric, and seeing what the primary/secondary quality distinction would have to be like in order to justify saying that kind of thing about the secondary qualities.

I take the task of justifying the rhetoric to be more important than making sure that the distinction classifies particular qualities as primary and secondary along the lines that philosophers have traditionally wanted to divide them. In particular, I take it to be of only secondary importance that the traditional paradigm cases of secondary qualities—sensory qualities like colors, tastes, smells, etc.—turn out to be secondary qualities, when the distinction between primary and secondary qualities is cashed out in the way that I suggest. While I do think that my distinction carves pretty close to the traditional one, I am primarily concerned to provide a distinction that justifies the rhetoric, not one that justifies standard classifications of particular qualities as primary or secondary.

Following are some examples of the sorts of rhetoric that I am concerned to justify. Again, what I want to focus on from these passages is just the characterization of what's supposed to be

distinctive of the secondary qualities, and how they are supposed to be different from the primary qualities, rather than the claims about which particular qualities are primary and which are secondary.<sup>2</sup> I will present fairly long string of examples all at once, and draw out themes afterwards.

Democritus:

By convention, sweet; by convention, bitter; by convention, cold; by convention, color; but in reality, atoms and void.<sup>3</sup>

St. Paul:

There is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean....<sup>4</sup>

Locke:

What I have said concerning colors and smells, may be understood also of tastes and sounds, and other the like sensible qualities; which, whatever reality we, by mistake, attribute to them, are in truth nothing in the objects themselves, but powers to produce various sensations in us, and depend on those primary qualities, viz. bulk, figure, and motion of parts; as I have said.<sup>5</sup>

The particular bulk, number, and motion of the parts of fire, or snow, are really in them, whether anyone's senses perceive them or no: and therefore they may be called real qualities, because they really exist in those bodies. But light, heat, whiteness, or coldness, are no more really in them, than sickness or pain is in manna. Take away the sensation of them; let not the eyes see light, or colors, nor the ears hear sounds; let the palate not taste, nor the nose smell, and all colors, tastes, odors, and sounds... vanish and cease.<sup>6</sup>

Bernard Williams:

In understanding, even sketchily, at a general and reflective level, why things appear variously coloured to various observers, we shall find that we have left behind any idea that, in some way which transcends those facts, they 'really' have one colour rather than another. In thinking of these explanations, we are in fact using a conception in which colour does not figure at all as a quality of the things.<sup>7</sup>

We can say, and indeed say truly, that grass before there was consciousness was green... But it is, nonetheless, relative, relating to human tastes and interests.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas Nagel:

The third step [in adopting an objective conception of the world] is to try to form a conception of that true nature [of the physical world] independent of its appearance either to us or to other types of observers. This means not only not thinking of the physical world from our own particular point of view, but not thinking of it from a more general human perceptual point of view either: not thinking of how it looks, feels, smells, tastes, or sounds. *These secondary qualities then drop out of our picture of the external world.*<sup>9</sup>

Colin McGinn:

Secondary qualities resemble properties like being poisonous or nourishing in this respect: plainly, these properties are relative to some implicit or explicit choice of creature as that with respect to which a substance is declared poisonous or nourishing. This relativity implies that there is no genuine disagreement between us and the Martians when they call an object green which we call red...<sup>10</sup>

I think it is an *a priori* truth that only the primary qualities correspond to how things are in themselves...<sup>11</sup>

What the scientifically informed view denies is [not that objects are coloured, but] just that objects are *objectively* or *intrinsically* coloured, i.e. that objects have colour in the way that they have shape; it denies that possession of colour is an observer-independent condition.<sup>12</sup>

Some themes emerge from these passages, which provide us with three desiderata for an account of what the secondary qualities are:

*Observer-Dependence:* Secondary qualities are supposed to depend, in some non-trivial way, on the existence or the peculiarities of observers in a way that primary qualities do not.<sup>13</sup>

*Relativity:* Secondary qualities are supposed to be unlike primary qualities in that an object can have a secondary quality relative to one observer that it lacks relative to another.<sup>14</sup>

*Less-than-full Reality:* The secondary qualities are supposed to be metaphysically second-class. They display a sort of *unreality* - though we are correct in attributing secondary qualities to things, there is something *less than fully real* about them.<sup>15</sup>

The last desideratum looks particularly problematic. It is quite hard to say just what this could *possibly* amount to, prior to giving a bit more of an account of the distinction. Still, it does seem pretty clear that this is part of the idea.

It is worth pointing out, on the topic of less-than-full reality, that the sort of unreality that's wanted is *not* the sort we would get by saying that the secondary qualities are never instantiated, or that they are only instantiated by mental entities and we are mistaken when we attribute them to things outside the mind. Not that no one has ever said such things about the secondary qualities —

many people have. But it is not part of the initial, intuitively appealing picture of them. The appealing distinction is not between qualities that we correctly attribute to things and qualities that we mistakenly attribute to them. It is between two kinds of qualities, both of which are genuinely had by the things we attribute them to, but which differ in some metaphysically important way that privileges qualities of one kind over those of the other in terms of their capacity to genuinely characterize the way the world really is in itself. Because it is so hard to provide a sensible way of understanding "genuinely", "really" and "in itself" in sentences like the preceding, it is tempting to move to some other notion of less-than-full-reality, on which we are just mistaken in attributing the secondary qualities to the things that we in fact attribute them to. But it seems clear that this is not the sort of distinction in metaphysical status that's involved in the initially compelling picture of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities.

The project of identifying the primary/secondary quality distinction, as I construe it here, is the project of finding a distinction that satisfies the three desiderata above. It is the project of finding a distinction that gives us an important difference between the fully real, observer-independent, non-relative qualities of things, and the metaphysically second-class, observer-dependent, relative qualities of things.

## 2. Trouble

Though it certainly seems to be part of the idea behind the distinction that our attributions of both primary and secondary qualities are more or less correct, it might be that some sort of projectivist error theory is the best that we can do. Gideon Rosen (1994) discusses the urge to draw a metaphysically substantive distinction between two kinds of *facts*, such that facts of one kind characterize the world as it is in itself, are objective, fully real, etc., while facts of the other kind characterize the world as it is for us, are subjective, less than fully real, etc. He makes a persuasive case that this cannot be done.<sup>16</sup>

If Rosen is right that there is no interesting metaphysical distinction in point of objectivity and subjectivity between *facts*, then it is hard to see how there could be one at the level of *qualities*. If we had qualities that were, in some metaphysically interesting sense, subjective, less than fully real, etc., we could get metaphysically second-class facts by correctly attributing those qualities to things. So if there are not any interestingly subjective facts, there must not be any interestingly subjective qualities, either.

Rosen argues pretty convincingly that the usual ways in which people have tried to draw the distinction does not work. Let me briefly discuss two examples.

That some fact, quality, or entity is *mind-dependent* does not seem to impugn its full, first-class reality. Certainly a fact's being *causally* mind-dependent—in that its obtaining was brought about by some mental activity—does not make it metaphysically second-class. Facts about the existence of artifacts such as tables and chairs, for example, are as metaphysically respectable as facts get, and they are causally mind-dependent—the existence of my kitchen table was brought about, at least in part, by the thoughts, plans, and intentions of some carpenter. Other sorts of mind-dependence do not seem to fare any better.

Another popular way that people have attempted to characterize the secondary qualities has been in terms of *response dependence*.<sup>17</sup> The secondary qualities, we might try saying, are qualities of being disposed to cause certain sorts of responses—in particular, certain sensory responses—in us (in certain circumstances).

This also seems not to do the trick. That a thing is disposed to cause some response *R* in a subject *S* in circumstances *C* is a perfectly objective fact about the thing. Consider for example Locke's tertiary qualities, such as being disposed to melt wax in ordinary circumstances, or Rosen's example of being disposed to annoy fox terriers in ordinary circumstances. These are perfectly objective features of whatever has them—the fact that something is disposed to melt wax, or to annoy fox terriers, is not in any way

metaphysically second-class, subjective, or less than fully real. And if these are not metaphysically second-class, then neither is, for example, being disposed to cause sensations of kind *K* in humans.

Our disproportionate *interest* in facts of this last kind—facts about which things are disposed to cause which responses in humans—is subjective, parochial, and so forth, but the *facts themselves* are perfectly objective. Facts about what's disposed to cause certain kinds of sensations in us are just as much a part of the world as it is in itself as the facts about which things are disposed to melt wax or annoy fox terriers. So response-dependence does not seem to get us any metaphysically interesting distinction between the objective, genuine facts and those that are subjective and therefore somehow second-class.

The moral of Rosen's story seems to be: if an object has a quality, then it is a perfectly objective matter of fact that it has that quality. We can find qualities such that our reasons for being *interested* in which things have them are subjective and parochial, but that does not make them metaphysically second-class—it does not make the fact or the quality subjective in any metaphysically interesting sense.

This is trouble. It looks as if we will not be able to find any class of qualities about which *any* of the secondary quality rhetoric is justified—there are not any qualities the having of which is either relative or observer-dependent in any interesting way, and the only sense we can make of a quality's being metaphysically second-class is by its being unstantiated.<sup>18</sup> So, we will not be able to find any distinction between kinds of qualities that can play the role that we wanted the primary/secondary quality distinction to play.

I think that, while Rosen's criticisms of the distinctions he discusses are exactly right, there is another place to locate the distinction, which really will satisfy the desiderata, without committing us to any implausible metaphysics. Explaining where I want to locate the distinction requires a detour into discussions of self-locating belief.

### 3. Secondary Qualities and Self-Location

What do we do when we represent things as being a certain way? Probably the most central thing that we do is we *distinguish between possibilities*. My beliefs distinguish between the possibilities that I take to be candidates for actuality and the ones that I rule out, my desires distinguish between the possibilities that I hope for and those that I dread, and my assertions distinguish between (roughly) those possibilities that I am asking you to rule out and those you are free to leave open.<sup>19</sup> We can, then, think of the contents of representational items and states as sets of possibilities – all of the possibilities in which things are as the item or state represents things as being.

One way (the only way?) to effect a distinction between possibilities is by saying something about how various qualities are distributed – by, for example, attributing some quality to some object. I believe that Spot's mass is thirty kilos, desire that the glass is full of beer, and assert that France is hexagonal. The content of my belief, desire, or assertion is just the set of possibilities in which the relevant things have the relevant qualities.

What kinds of things are these *possibilities*? An initially attractive, and fairly standard, thing to say here is that they are possible ways for the world to be, or *possible worlds*. So when I believe, desire, or assert that Spot masses thirty kilos, I single out for some sort of special attention the class of possible worlds in which Spot masses thirty kilos. There is, however, good reason to think that the possibilities that we distinguish between in *thought*, at least, are finer-grained than this. When we have beliefs about what time it is, about who we are, or about features of our own particular predicament, we take a stand on more than just the global facts about what the world is like – on more than just which world is actual.

When I believe that it is 12:00, for example, the accuracy of my belief or assertion does not just depend on which world is actual – it also depends on which time is *present*. Since fixing which world is actual does not fix which time is present, the way in which my beliefs and assertions about the

time distinguish between possibilities is not well-captured by thinking of their contents as sets of possible worlds. When I have a belief about the time, I take a stand not so much (or not only) on which world I inhabit, but also on my (temporal) location within it. My beliefs about the time distinguish not between *worlds* so much as *locations within* worlds.

Other cases show us that this phenomenon is not specific to times. Harry is lost in Hogwarts after an amnesia-inducing magical accident. It could be that he is lost because he's missing some information about what the world is like – that is, because does not know which world is actual. He could be lost, for example, because he doesn't know what the actual floor plan of the castle is. But Harry could still be lost, even if he knew everything there is to know about which world is actual. Let Harry be looking at the Marauder's Map, which shows the complete floor plan of the castle, as well as the location of all of its inhabitants. He does not, then, lack any relevant information about what the world is like. He could, nonetheless, still fail to know where *he* is, because he could still fail to know which, of all of the creatures in the library, is *him* – perhaps the accident robbed both Ron and Harry of their memories, and now Harry is unsure whether he is Harry or Ron. Harry knows all of the relevant facts about the world: he knows that Harry Potter is in the West wing, and that Ron Weasley is in the East wing, but he still does not know whether *he* is in the West or the East wing, because he does not know whether he is Harry or Ron.

What Harry is not ignorant about what the world is like – Harry knows all of the relevant facts about the world. What Harry is ignorant about is something about his *location within* the world, even though he is as well-informed about the world as he could possibly be. In order to remedy his ignorance, Harry needs to rule out some possibilities. But the possibilities he needs to rule out are not possible ways for the world to be – they are possible locations (in this case, Ron's location) within a world.

To further illustrate the distinction between

these two kinds of contents – these two different ways in which a representation can distinguish between possibilities – let’s think for a moment about the sort of map you might find at the zoo. Typically, such maps come with a “you are here” arrow on them somewhere. But let’s start by thinking about a map without such an arrow on it. Such a map represents the zoo as being a certain way. It takes a stand on the relative locations of the lions and tigers and bears, the birds and the bees, the concession stand and the exit. It serves to distinguish between various possible zoos, and to provide its audience with information about which of the many possible zoos is the one that they presently inhabit. If there are several such maps, scattered around the zoo, they ought all to be representationally identical – if they are not, then at least one of the maps is wrong, and various sorts of inconveniences and disasters are liable to ensue.

Now consider what happens when we add “you are here” arrows to the maps. The first thing to notice is that now the maps in different parts of the zoo ought *not* to be representationally identical. If one map is by the monkey house and another by the viper pit, the arrows on them had better not point to the same spot on both maps. If they do, at least one of the maps is wrong, and various sorts of inconveniences and disasters are liable to ensue. The second thing to notice is that now the maps are informationally richer than they were before – they now take a stand, not just on what the zoo is like, but also on their readers’ locations within it. The maps with “you are here” arrows serve not just to distinguish between possible ways for a zoo to be, but also between possible locations for an individual to occupy within the zoo. When you look at a map without such an arrow, all you can rule out is candidate ways for the zoo to be that might, for all you knew before you looked at the map, have been the way it actually is. When you look at a map with such an arrow, you can also rule out candidate locations within the zoo that might, for all you knew before you looked at the map, have been the one you occupy. This is the reason why the maps cannot all be the same once we have started adding arrows to them.

Now, when you get information about the layout of the zoo, you are really getting information about the world – you are getting the information that it contains a zoo with a certain sort of configuration, or that some particular one of its zoos has that configuration. So the two kinds of maps illustrate the distinction between two kinds of content that any sort of representational item could have: the sort that just provides information about the world is like, and the sort that also provides information about one’s location within the world.

Let’s introduce some terminology. Say that the first, arrowless sort of map, has *possible-worlds content*, and that the second, arrow-including sort of map has *self-locating content*. The difference between the two sorts of content is, again, that the first distinguishes only between possible ways for the world to be, while the second distinguishes also between possible locations that one might occupy within a world. My beliefs, desires, etc. with possible-worlds content distinguish between ways the world might be, while my beliefs, desires, etc. with centered-worlds content distinguish between situations I might be in. The latter are more fine-grained than the former, since (in most cases), each world is going to contain a number of positions for some agent to occupy.

Let’s also call the content of the first sort of map – the set of possible worlds that are as represented – a *possible worlds proposition*, and let’s call the content of the second sort of map – the set of possible *locations* that are as represented – a *self-locating proposition*. (In fact, as Lewis (1979) points out, we can make do with just the one kind of content – for each possible worlds proposition, there is, to introduce a technical term, a *boring* self-locating proposition that, for each world, includes either all or none of the locations within it. So the actual distinction does the work here is probably the one between boring and interesting self-locating propositions, rather than the one between possible-worlds and self-locating propositions. But it makes exposition easier and more intuitive to stick with the possible-worlds/self-locating contrast, so I am going to do that,

with the understanding that everything could be rephrased in terms of the boring/interesting distinction.)

Finally, say that, when a self-locating proposition includes my actual, present location, I am *correctly located by* – in the sense that my location is correctly characterized by – that self-locating proposition.

With the distinction between self-locating and possible-worlds propositions in hand, we can introduce a distinction between kinds of qualities that we might attribute to things, which I think is a good candidate for the primary/secondary quality distinction.

We single out a class of possible worlds – a possible worlds proposition – by attributing qualities to things. By representing Kermit as having the quality, *being a frog*, we pick out a class of worlds—all and only the worlds in which Kermit is a frog. When I believe that the world is a certain way, I represent some things as being frogs and others as being bears, some things as being slimy and others as being furry, some as being hexagonal and others as circular, and so on. In this way I narrow down the range of worlds that I take to be candidates for actuality. (We can tell the same kind of story of other kinds of representational states and entities—for example desires, fears, and natural language sentences.) There is a range of qualities such that attributing them to things serves to distinguish (only) between possible ways for the world to be – representations that attribute these sorts of qualities to things have possible-worlds contents. Stipulatively, call these sorts of qualities the *objective* qualities.

When I have beliefs not just about what the world is like, but also about my location within it—when I have *self-locating* beliefs—something very similar is going on. I represent some things as being *nearby* and others as *far away*, some events as *present* and others as *past* or *future*, and some objects as being *to my left* and others as *on my nose*. In this way I narrow down the range of possible *predicaments*—possible locations within worlds—that I take to be candidates to be the one

that I am in. (Again, the same goes for other representations with this kind of content.) That is, there is a range of qualities such that attributing them to things serves to distinguish not just between possible ways for the world to be, but also between possible locations within a world that one might occupy. Representations that attribute these sorts of qualities to things have self-locating contents. Stipulatively, call these sorts of qualities the *subjective* qualities.

This (finally) is where I want to locate the distinction between primary and secondary qualities: it is the distinction between objective and subjective qualities, in the sense explained above.

Before moving on to the reasons why I think that this is a good place to locate the distinction, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that not all self-locating contents are *geographically* self-locating, and not all subjective features are relative-location features like *being nearby*. Consider the self-locating propositions, *that my pants are on fire*, *that everyone is out to get me*, *that Kermit is out to get me*, *that Kermit is out to set my pants on fire*, *and that Kermit is disposed to cause greenish sensations in me in standard viewing conditions*. (These are distinct from the corresponding possible-worlds propositions, that Egan's pants are on fire, *that everyone is out to get Egan*, *that Kermit is out to get Egan*, *that Kermit is out to set Egan's pants on fire*, *and that Kermit is disposed to cause greenish sensations in Egan in standard viewing conditions*.) These sorts of self-locating contents have nothing special to do with geographical self-location, and the subjective features that they attribute to things (e.g., *being my pants*, *being out to get me*, *being disposed to cause greenish sensations in me in standard viewing conditions*) are importantly unlike the ones (such as *being nearby*) that I have discussed so far in that they are not features of having a certain geographical location relative to the believer.

So just as self-locating belief is not restricted to *geographical* self-location, subjective features are not restricted to relative-position features like



being nearby. Most importantly for our purposes, they include features that are tied up with the effects that things have on our sensory apparatus (being disposed to cause *F* sensations in me in normal viewing/hearing/tasting/etc conditions, for example). This is particularly relevant because these sorts of subjective features look much more like the traditional secondary qualities than subjective features like being nearby.

#### 4. Back to the *Desiderata*

- *Less-than-full-reality*

One big selling point for this way of understanding of the primary/secondary quality distinction is that it gives us a satisfying way of cashing out perhaps the most puzzling strand in the secondary quality rhetoric —the strand that paints the secondary qualities as metaphysically second-class, less than fully real.

One way that the less-than-full-reality talk is sometimes put is that the secondary qualities go missing from the “absolute conception” of the world. They are features of things “as they are for us” rather than “as they are in themselves”. Bernard Williams (1978) characterizes the distinction between primary and secondary qualities in this way – as the distinction between those qualities that do and those that do not feature in the absolute conception of the world, where this is something like the conception that all rational inquirers, regardless of how their particular sensory equipment is set up, would have to agree on in order to be maximally well-informed.

As a distinction between two different kinds of objective qualities, this falls victim to something very like Rosen’s attack on response-dependence as a kind of subjectivity. Which objective qualities a thing has is just a straightforward fact about that thing. If some object has a certain objective quality, then *everybody* has to attribute that quality to the thing in order to completely and correctly characterize it—*all* of the objective qualities of a thing will appear in the maximally complete

conception of the world to which all maximally well-informed inquirers must agree.

The conception of the world on which maximally well-informed Australians and North Americans must agree includes the fact that loud drumming is disposed to annoy fox terriers. It also includes the facts that Vegemite is disposed to cause unpleasant sensations in North Americans, and that Vegemite is disposed to cause pleasant sensations in Australians. If the Australians leave out the first, or the North Americans the second, then they are not maximally well-informed. No objective quality – no quality such that the proposition that something has or lacks it is a *possible-worlds* proposition – fails to appear in the (maximally complete) conception of the world to which all maximally well-informed rational inquirers must agree.

However, when we characterize the distinction between primary and secondary qualities as the distinction between objective and subjective features, it is quite plausible that secondary qualities do not appear in the absolute conception of the world. The absolute conception of the world is supposed to be the one that *everybody* has got to accept, regardless of what their perceptual apparatus, etc. is like. That looks like the conception that picks out which world is actual, and no more. Any conception of the world that has a content more fine-grained than a possible-worlds proposition is going to be non-mandatory—it need not be shared by all of the maximally well-informed inhabitants of a given world.

So features that appear in the absolute conception will be ones that determine possible-worlds contents—the objective features. Features that determine centered-worlds contents—subjective features—will not appear in the absolute conception. They only show up in our particular, located, parochial conception. Maximally well-informed Australians and North Americans must agree that Vegemite tastes great to Australians. They do *not* need to agree that Vegemite tastes great. That is: both must attribute the objective



feature, *tasting great to Australians* to Vegemite, if they are to be maximally well-informed. If they fail to do so, they are leaving something out or getting something wrong. But Australians and North Americans need *not*, in order to be maximally well-informed, attribute the subjective feature, *tasting great*, to Vegemite. Supposing (as is near enough to true) that Vegemite really does taste great to all Australians, and awful to all North Americans, a North American who attributed *tasting great* to Vegemite would be making a mistake, and so would *fail* to be maximally well-informed. (Since no North American is correctly located by the self-locating proposition that *Vegemite tastes great*.) Similarly, an Australian who failed to attribute *tasting great* to Vegemite would be making a mistake, and so fail to be maximally well informed. (Since all Australians are correctly located by the self-locating proposition that *Vegemite tastes great*.) In the same way, if I am in Canberra and you are in Ann Arbor, and we are both to be maximally well-informed, we must both agree that Sydney is near Egan. We ought not to agree about whether Sydney is *nearby*.

Here are two alternative statements of the same idea: (i) If you fail to believe some true possible-worlds proposition, you have failed to completely characterize the world. But, failure to believe all the true centered-worlds contents is compatible with having completely characterized the world, though not your place within it. (ii) You do not need subjective features in order to draw the map right—all you need is qualities. You only need subjective features to put the “you are here” arrow in the right spot. And while all of the maximally well-informed inhabitants of a world have got to agree on what the map looks like, they do not have to agree on where the “you are here” arrow points.

This difference between objective and subjective features—that all of our maximally well-informed worldmates need to agree on which objective features things have, though they need not agree on which subjective features they have—promises to justify a great deal of the rhetoric of less-than-full-reality (as well as the rhetoric of

relativity) that surrounds the secondary qualities.

We have mentioned several times that secondary qualities are supposed to be, “not part of the world as it is in itself, but of the world as it is for us”. This too is a natural way to characterize subjective features. Representations with possible-worlds contents describe the world as it is in itself—if accurate, they tell us what the *world* is like. Representations with centered-worlds content describe what the world is like *for us*—they tell us (if accurate) about our own individual *situation* in the world; our own individual *predicament*. We can change how things are represented as being *for us* without changing how the world is represented as being *in itself*, because we can represent ourselves as being in a different *predicament* without representing ourselves as being in a different *world*.

All of this—the failure of subjective features to appear in a Williams-type absolute conception of the world, the fact that we can pick out a unique world as actual without recourse to subjective features, and the natural sense in which objective features are qualities of things “as they are in themselves”, while subjective features are qualities of things “as they are for us”—provides us with, I think, a quite satisfactory way of understanding the rhetoric of less-than-full reality. This is a big deal. It is easy to see the less-than-full-reality talk as hopelessly obscure. It is a remarkable fact that, despite this, we are still drawn to talking this way, and that passages in which people do talk this way can still ring true. I count it as a substantial benefit of this account of the primary/secondary quality distinction that it gives us a reasonably precise and plausible way of understanding the attributions of less-than-full reality to the secondary qualities.

#### • Relativity

We also have a nice account of the *relativity* of secondary qualities. Colin McGinn (1983) says that colors are secondary qualities, and wants it to be possible that (i) the Martians attribute *being green* to the things we attribute *being red* to, and vice versa, and (ii) we are both right. If colors are subjective features, we can get things being green

for us and red for Martians, and vice versa. In general, we can get incompatible features  $F$  and  $G$  such that one observer represents some object as  $F$ , another represents it as  $G$ , and they are both right. We can also get the sort of change over time that McGinn wants—if we were all taste-permuted in the right way, things that used to be sweet would start being bitter. We'd still attribute the same features to things when we called them 'sweet' or 'bitter', but different things would have the features, because of the changes in us (assuming *being sweet*, for example, is something like the subjective feature, *being disposed to cause S sensations in me now*).

It is far from clear that McGinn is right about how colors or tastes behave, but that is not the point. The point is to make sense of the possibility of there being some features or other that act the way McGinn wants colors and tastes to act.

- *Observer-Dependence*

By taking secondary qualities to be subjective features, we can also justify the rhetoric of observer-dependence that we encountered in the opening section. (The following will be a bit metaphorical. The cashing out of the metaphor gets slightly technical – if you are interested, you can find it in my “Secondary Qualities and Self-Location”, in the section that looks very much like this one.)

Take an ordinary possible world, viewed from no particular perspective. Nothing has any subjective features there, because there is no privileged center – no spot where the “you are here” arrow is pointing – for them to bear the relevant relations to. Pick a center—add the “you are here” arrow—and things suddenly take on a number of new qualities; qualities that they get not (or not entirely) in virtue of what the world is like in itself, but in virtue of where the arrow points. It is quite natural to think of these features as being *added* to the world by the selection of a center – a standpoint from which to view it. The selection of a center—the adoption of some subjective position

within the world—provides the world with all of these features which are not present in the world considered on its own, without any center.

In the same way, subjective features (unlike objective features) disappear when you take away the “you are here” arrow. Nothing is *nearby*, in my *ear*, or *disposed to cause greenish sensations in creatures like me* until you specify a center. This looks like a satisfying sort of observer-dependence.

Note that there is a certain sort of observer-dependence that we do *not* get. We do not, even on the assumption that colors are subjective features, get the truth of, “if there had been no observers, nothing would have been colored”. Lots of merely possible things have dispositions to cause various responses in me, even the ones in worlds where I do not exist (or don't have any counterparts). The fact that the subjective features don't appear until we select a center seems like enough, though, to justify (at least most of) the kind of observer-dependence and less-than-full-reality talk that many philosophers go in for when discussing the secondary qualities. The secondary qualities “fall away” when you take the objective, observer-independent view—stop thinking from the perspective of some observer, and all of the secondary qualities disappear.

## 5. *Applications and Conclusions*

One might not be happy that it turns out that relative-location features like being nearby turn out to be secondary qualities. One might, for example, think that in order to be a secondary quality, you need to have something to do with how things sensorily appear. If what we're interested in is carving along the traditional primary/secondary quality lines, we can accommodate this by insisting on a fourth desideratum, in addition to relativity, observer-dependence, and less-than-full reality. In that case, only a proper subset of the interesting subjective features would be secondary qualities – the ones we might call the sensory subjective features. (Features like *looking green to me*, *being*

*disposed to cause unpleasant olfactory sensations in me in standard circumstances, etc.)*

But I'm not really terribly concerned about cutting along the traditional lines. What's most interesting to me about all of this is that it provides us with a recipe for making sense of attributions of a metaphysically heavyweight sort of relativity and observer-dependence to some bunch of qualities, or to the subject matter of some area of discourse. The availability of this distinction between subjective and objective qualities and states of affairs gives us something to say about colors, tastes, and so forth, that combines a number of features we might have thought could not be combined: we can say, without being error theorists and without adopting a crazy metaphysics, that these sorts of sensory qualities are observer-relative and observer dependent in a way that shapes and masses are not, and that the shapes and masses of things, but not their sensory qualities, are fully real, objective features of the things as they are in themselves. Whether we want, at the end of the day, to say these things about the sensory qualities or not, it is good to have a view on the table that would, if correct, allow us to say such things. My main interest here has been in justifying the distinctive anti-realist and relativist rhetoric about secondary qualities, and because it is rhetoric that we see, and that seems appealing, in a number of different places – not just in discussions of sensory qualities like colors, tastes, and smells.

Ethical, aesthetic, and comic qualities, in particular, have also come in for this sort of treatment. It is hard to figure out whether they *deserve* such treatment until we have a firm grip on just what they would have to be like for it to be warranted. This is one thing such claims could mean. I suspect it might be the *only* sensible thing they could mean.

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### Notes

1. This essay is based on a forthcoming paper, "Secondary Qualities and Self-Location." I have revised it in order to focus more on the big picture issues, and less on the technical details of the proposal.
2. I suspect that, for example, *colors* probably are not secondary qualities, but the claims that are made about the colors below are still useful for characterizing the primary/secondary quality distinction.
3. From McKirahan (1994) (DK68B9). Thanks to Richard Hall for the reference.
4. Romans 14:14. Thanks to Tyler Doggett for the reference.
5. Locke (1690/1996: 51). (Book 2, chapter 8, section 14.)
6. *Ibid.*: 51-52. (Book 2, chapter 8, section 17.)
7. Williams (1978: 242).

8. *Ibid.*: 243. Williams is talking about amusingness, not green, in the second quote, but nothing hangs on this.
9. Nagel (1989: 14). My italics.
10. McGinn (1983: 10).
11. *Ibid.*: 114.
12. *Ibid.*: 118.
13. See the Locke, Nagel, and McGinn passages above.
14. McGinn, St. Paul, and possibly Williams are good exemplars of this kind of talk.
15. This strand of the rhetoric is particularly strong in the passages from Democritus and Williams.
16. Alex Byrne (2001, 2002) makes some similar points (influenced by Rosen), in response to Stroud (2000).
17. For general discussion of response-dependence, see Johnston (1989, 1993, 1998), and Pettit (1991).
18. One might think of the distinction between *natural* and *unnatural* qualities as a place to locate the primary/secondary quality distinction. This is a metaphysically interesting distinction. But it is probably not metaphysically interesting in the right way—it does not, e.g., license the sorts of relativity and observer-dependence rhetoric that surrounds the secondary qualities. (Thanks to Robert Stalnaker for discussion here.)
19. See for example Stalnaker (1984).

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