ABSTRACT. This article is a brief presentation and defense of response-dispositionalist intentionalism against a family of objections. The view claims that for a surface to have an objective stable color is to have a disposition to cause in normal observers a response, namely, intentional phenomenal-color experience. The objections, raised recently by M. Johnston, B. Stroud, and by Byrne and Hilbert, claim that any dispositionalist view is unfair to the naive perceiver-thinker, saddles her with massive error and represents her as maladapted to her environment. The paper reconstructs the main line of thought in favor of response-intentionalism and argues that it is in fact rather charitable and fair to naïve cognizers, and also avoids a cluster of related objections.

1. INTRODUCTION

Color dispositionalism has been the dominant view of color since Locke and Reid until recent times. It has been generalized to response-dispositionalism about other secondary and tertiary qualities. However, in the last decade, it has ceded its titles to its competitors, under the joint fire from opposite directions of various primary quality views of color on the one side, and of color eliminativism on the other. Its two prominent defenders, C. McGinn and M. Johnston, have changed sides around the turn of millennium. I think this is an unfortunate situation. In this paper I want to explore the chances of dispositionalism, and to address some of the recent objections against it. The pride of place shall be given to the fairness objection, alleging that it is not fair to ordinary color-perceivers. I shall discuss two versions or two prongs of the objection. The first is focused upon demands of interpreting the ordinary speaker and thinker and her color-talk. Call the philosopher who wishes to derive substantial philosophical conclusion from constraints on interpretation “interpretivist”. It has been argued by the interpretativists like
that any (response-)dispositionalist theory is uncharitable since it saddles naïve cognizers with massive error and introduces a gap between seeing and thinking. It has also been argued by more naturalistic authors, including Johnston (1998), Byrne and Hilbert (2007), that it is unacceptable because it saddles the naïve perceiver with ecologically deracinated representations of her surroundings. The two criticism run very much in parallel, the former alleging error and the later maladaptation, the twin cognitive and practical mortal sins. So is the response-dispositionalist view really as nasty and unecological as they allege?

Let me start by admitting an additional motivation for concentrating upon this line of criticism. Stroud, who is the most prominent interpretivist raising the objection from the alleged lack of charity, concentrates upon the version of response-dispositionalism that I find most congenial. The version claims that an objective stable color of a surface is a disposition to produce a specific mental response in perceivers, namely intentional seeing of the color of the surface. Let me call the version “response-dispositionalist intentionalism”, RI for short. Stroud has some good and some bad news for intentionalist views in general and, in particular for RI. The good news is that it is, in his opinion, the best version of dispositionalism. The bad, indeed very bad news is that it is untenable, being open to regress argument, to accusation of falsely disjoining the content of color perception form content of color thought, and of being uncharitable. Now, the most detailed published answers to Stroud, the ones by Byrne, Boghossian and J. Campbell did not even try to defend the attacked RI view. So, given that RI is my favorite brand of dispositionalism, I thought I might try a single-handed humanitarian intervention in its favor.

In the balance of the Introduction I shall summarize the view to be defended and briefly place it on the map of related views. In Section 2 I shall first set out the central criticism. Then, in Section 3 I shall reconstruct the main line of thought in favor of RI, presenting it as a charitable compromise between two competing radical views. Section 4 finally summarizes the main replies to the criticism. Along the way I shall very briefly mention other related objections, and possible lines of answer, without going into any detail. But I hope the bird’s eye overview of the debate within a framework charitable to dispositionalism might soften the hearts of some of its enemies, and attract the yet undecided readers. Let me then first present the components of response-dependent or -dispositionalist intentionalism.