

# Identity Criteria for Properties

By Roderick M. Chisholm

**W**HAT IS A PROPERTY? WE CANNOT SAY THAT a property is a thing that is exemplified; for some properties, such as that of being a unicorn, are not exemplified. Nor can we say that a property is a thing that could be exemplified; for some properties, such as that of being a round square, cannot be exemplified. But by appealing to certain familiar intentional phenomena, we may say what a property is.

## An Intentional Definition of What a Property Is

The debate about universals, in the Middle Ages, concerned those entities that were said to be “predicable of many.” This traditional expression, I suggest, gives us the essence of a property or attribute: an attribute is anything that may be attributed. In explicating the concept in this way, we presuppose familiarity with what it is to believe, or to judge. More particularly, we presuppose familiarity with what is expressed by means of the locution, “x believes there to be something that is F.”

Our account consists of two simple definitions. The first is introduced merely as a notational abbreviation. Its purpose is to make clear what sort of belief is to be considered an “attribution,” in our present sense of that expression.

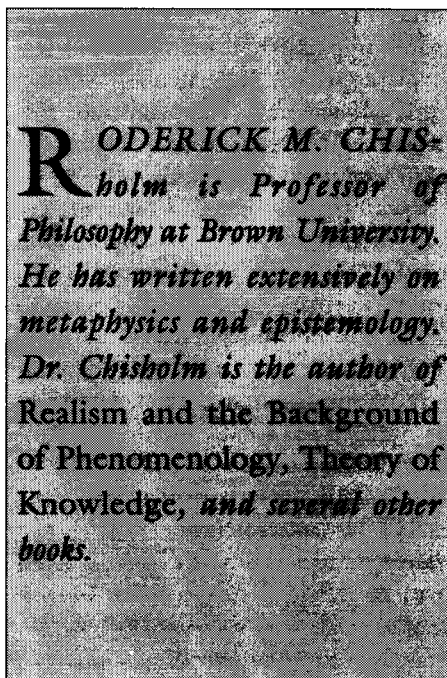
- D1  $x$  attributes being F =Df  $x$  believes there to be something that is F
- D2 Being F is a property or attribute =Df Being F is possibly such that there is someone who attributes it

The letter “F” is here schematic and may be replaced by any well-formed English predicate.

Having given a definition of what a property is, may we now add an adequate criterion of property identity? We will consider three possible criteria — an extensional criterion, a modal criterion, and an intentional criterion.

## The Extensional Criterion

There is a relatively simple criterion for the identity of classes: classes are identical provided only that they have the same members. That is to say, a class A is identical with a class B, if and only if, whatever is a member of A is a member of B and conversely. Can we also apply this criterion to the



identity of properties? The result would be:

- (1) Being F is identical with being G, if and only if: whatever is F is G, and conversely

This will hardly do for properties.

According to one traditional example, adoption of this criterion would have the consequence that the property of being a rational animal is identical with the property of being a featherless biped. According to another traditional example, such a criterion would have the consequence that the property of having a sense of humor would be identical with that of being a rational animal. It would also have the consequence that the property of being a unicorn is identical with that of being a mermaid. Our definitions make it clear, however, that such consequences are unacceptable. One can believe there to be a rational animal without believing there to be a featherless biped; and one can believe there to be a featherless biped without believing there to be a rational animal; one can believe there to be a unicorn without believing there to be a mermaid; and so on.

### The Modal Criterion

A second possible criterion of property identity may be formulated by adding a modal condition to the first:

- (2) Being F is identical with being G, if and only if: being F and being G are necessarily such that whatever has the one has the other

This tells us that the logical equivalence of properties yields an adequate criterion of property identity. Such a criterion would exclude the examples just considered. The property of being a rational animal is not necessarily such that whatever has it is a featherless biped. And the property of being a unicorn is not necessarily such that whatever has it is a mermaid.

But adoption of this criterion would have the consequence that the property of being an equilateral triangle is the same as the property of being an equiangular triangle. Although the two properties are exemplified by exactly the same things, there are truths about the one property that are not truths about the other. Referring back to D2, our intentional definition of property, we may put the objection this way:

- (1) Believing there to be something that is equiangular is other than believing there to be something that is equilateral.  
Therefore (2) attributing the property of being equiangular is other than attributing the property of being equilateral.  
Hence (3) the property of being equiangular is other than the property of being equilateral.  
But (4) the properties of being equiangular and of being equilateral are logically equivalent — i.e., they are necessarily such that whatever exemplifies the one also exemplifies the other.  
Therefore (5) there are properties which are logically equivalent but not identical.  
Hence (6) the logical equivalence of properties does not yield an adequate criterion of property identity.

The difficulty may be made clearer by a somewhat different example, The modal criterion of property identity would have the consequence that prop-

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*“One can believe there to be a rational animal without believing there to be a featherless biped; and one can believe there to be a featherless biped without believing there to be a rational animal.”*

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erties that can be easily grasped are identical with properties that are difficult to grasp. For example, it would have the consequence that the property of being wise is identical with the property of being either (a) wise and feathered or (b) wise and not-feathered; yet one may believe there to be something that is wise without thereby believing there to be something that is either (a) wise and feathered or (b) wise and non-feathered.

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*“The property of being red is a property that particular individuals can have; but the property of being the color that ripe tomatoes have is a property that only properties can have.”*

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### **The Intentional Criterion**

The intentional criterion of property identity is both modal and intentional:

- (3) Being F is identical with being G, if and only if: the properties of being F and being G are necessarily such that the one is attributed if and only if the other is attributed

This criterion does not have the difficulties of the previous one. It does not require us to say that the property of being an equiangular triangle is identical with the property of being an equilateral triangle. And it does not require us to say that the property of being wise is identical with the property of being either feathered and wise or non-feathered and wise. The intentional criterion, then, would seem to be what we are looking for.

Consider, however, the following objection. “Suppose that there is a person who does not know that ripe tomatoes are red, and believes that they are yellow. He will refuse to attribute the property being-red to ripe tomatoes. But he will not hesitate to agree to the fact that the color of ripe tomatoes is the color of ripe tomatoes. — ‘whatever color that may be.’ Hence it is one thing to attribute the property of being-red and it is another thing to attribute the color of ripe tomatoes. And therefore the proposed criterion of property identity is inadequate.”

**T**HE OBJECTION CONFUSES TWO VERY DIFFERENT properties. One is the property of being red — a property that individual things may have. The other is the property of being the color that ripe tomatoes have — a property that only properties may have.\* Therefore it is a mistake to conclude that the property of being red is the property of being the color of ripe tomatoes.

The reply may be put somewhat more clearly this way. Our original statement, “Red is the color of ripe tomatoes,” is ambiguous. It may be taken to mean (1) that being red is identical with being the color that ripe tomatoes have. In this case it is false. For the property of being red is a property that particular individuals can have; but the property of being the color that ripe tomatoes have is a property that only properties can have. The statement, “Red is the color of ripe tomatoes,” may also be taken to mean (2) that the color of being red is exemplified by exactly the same things as is the color that ripe tomatoes have. In this case, the statement is true but not in conflict with the intentional criterion of property identity.  $\phi$

\* Compare Wittgenstein’s observation: “It is easy to see that not all colour concepts are logically of the same sort, e.g., the difference between the concepts ‘colour of gold’ or ‘colour of silver’ and ‘yellow’ or ‘grey.’” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 9e.