The color incompatibility problem is well known as one of the philosophical problems which lead Wittgenstein away from his views in the *Tractatus* during the “phenomenological” period. Wittgenstein's foray into explicitly “phenomenological” language, which coincides with and is closely related to the color-incompatibility problem, is generally considered to be short-lived, replaced in the subsequent work with different sets of considerations culminating in the philosophical problems raised in the *Investigations*. But some of Wittgenstein's later remarks in *On Certainty*, and especially The Remarks on Color should give us pause in dismissing Wittgenstein's concern with “phenomenological” problems as merely fleeting or transitional.

In this paper, rather than argue about whether Wittgenstein was himself a phenomenologist, or attempt to delineate specific phenomenological periods in his work, I will examine Wittgenstein's philosophical engagement with a problem central to the phenomenology of his day, that of the status of synthetic a priori knowledge in relation to immediate experience. I will suggest that the struggle with this problem marks Wittgenstein's thought not only in those first years after returning to Cambridge, but also in the post-*Investigations* period. This extended engagement is evidence of Wittgenstein's important, developing critique of a central theoretical underpinning of Husserlian phenomenology. In this light, the color-incompatibility problem can be seen as the marker of a set of phenomenological problems—ultimately Kantian-influenced problems as to the status of various types of judgment—that were a central concern for Wittgenstein from the post-*Tractatus* period up until his death. This treatment of Wittgenstein's “critique” of phenomenology will help to shed light on a central problem concerning the nature of a priori knowledge in phenomenology and in the transcendental tradition\(^1\) generally, and at the same time will illustrate the central importance of phenomenological problems for the development of Wittgenstein's mature views. I will argue that these problems are best understood through the lens of the traditional Kantian distinction between forms of judgment, a fundamental interpretive schema of

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\(^1\) The term is David Carr's. See his excellent discussion and defense of Kant and Husserl against Heidegger's critique of the “Metaphysics of the Subject” in *The Paradox of Subjectivity: the Self in the Transcendental Tradition*. 
the utmost importance not only for Wittgenstein but also for Frege, for the logical positivists, and for the contemporaneously developing tradition of phenomenology.

I. Color-Incompatibility as a Phenomenological Problem

We can view the color-incompatibility problem in the *Tractatus* as a problem concerning the status of the synthetic a priori. In most readings of the text, Wittgenstein allows for only the equivalents of Kant's analytic a priori judgments (logical propositions) and synthetic a posteriori judgments (statements of facts). Since statements of facts consist in elementary propositions, each of which is logically independent of every other, there is no way to explain incompatibilities (such as those that arise in the case of color) which are not formal logical contradictions in the strict Tractarian sense, but instead derive from the material logical content of the judgment. According to the *Tractatus*, a proposition such as “This place in the visual field at the present moment is not blue” is not logically derivable from “this place in the visual field at the present moment is red,” since the only form of necessity is formal logical necessity, which is not only a priori but also analytic, and yet this very situation is still said to be “impossible, in fact logically impossible, since it is ruled out by the logical structure of color.”

Thus, as Roberto Ciuni notes, “the conflict emerges clearly because of the equivalences between analytic propositions and a priori propositions and between synthetic propositions and a posteriori propositions. Hence, the propositional bipartition deriving from these equivalences is not satisfactory to explain the status of the propositions expressing colour exclusion or its violation.”

The problem of color incompatibility thus demands a solution that acknowledges the status of certain judgments as non-analytic (thus not logical in the strict Tractarian sense) and yet nonetheless a priori and logical, since, as Wittgenstein observes both in the *Tractatus* and in the later work, there seems to be a sort of “logic” at play in color-incompatibility.

According to Frege's discussion of analyticity in the introduction to the *Philosophy of Arithmetic* (a text with

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2 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §6.375
4 Ciuni, “The Color Exclusion Problem and 'Synthetic A Priori' Propositions,” 128. The first mention of the problem is generally attributed to Ramsey's 1923 review of the *Tractatus* in *Mind*, although Wittgenstein may have become aware of it earlier either on his own or during his periodic discussions with Ramsey in Austria in the 1920s.
which we know Wittgenstein was very familiar\(^5\), the distinction between the analytic and the synthetic concerns
not the content of the judgment but rather the justification for making the judgment. […] this is not a
judgment about conditions, psychological, physiological, and physical relations, which have made it
possible to form the content of the proposition in our consciousness; nor is it a judgment about the way
in which another person, perhaps erroneously, has come to believe it to be true; rather it is a judgment
about the ultimate ground upon which rests the justification for holding it to be true.\(^6\)

Since this “ultimate ground” for the justification of the judgment is not to be found in the specific content of that
judgment, but in the original evidence for its truth, the question of its analytic or synthetic nature must be asked
without reference to the epistemological conditions through which the specific content of the judgment is
known\(^7\); the analyticity of the judgment is a formal matter for logic alone, free of all considerations as to the
empirical data which help to determine its content, and the way in which its truth might be regarded by others.

The analysis thus leads us to conclude whether the judgment is analytic or synthetic by

following it right back to the primitive truths. If, in carrying out this process, we come only on general
logical laws and on definitions, then the truth is analytic, whereby it is presumed that we must take
account also of all propositions upon which the admissibility of any of the definitions depends. If,
however, it is impossible to give the proof without making use of truths that are not of a general logical
nature, but belong to the sphere of some special science, then the proposition is a synthetic one.\(^8\)

In the case of color-incompatibility, a problem arises which is not analytic, on Frege's terms, since it is not a
result of the general logical laws or of definitions, but also not a posteriori, insofar as it is not a matter of the
epistemological content of that which is being judged but of the material, logical content of the concept involved
in the judgment. The obvious third possibility for such cases (especially given the dominance of Neokantianism
in Germanophone philosophy in the early 20\(^{th}\) century) was some version of the Kantian synthetic a priori.

One philosophical school which took this sort of approach to such problems was Husserlian
phenomenology, which Wittgenstein seems to have been aware of at least since the time of his conversations
with Moritz Schlick in Vienna beginning in 1928.\(^9\) It seems that, in Schlick's view, Husserlian phenomenology
amounted to little more than the claim that phenomenological propositions just were synthetic a priori

\(^5\) Monk, Ludwig Wittgenstein, The Duty of Genius, 32- 33; 162-63; and passim.
\(^7\) The accuracy of Frege's interpretation of the analytic with regard to Kant's first Critique has been questioned (Cf.
Garver, This Complicated Form of Life, 31- 35). As our interest is not an exegesis of Kant's doctrine, but only the
influence of the analytic-synthetic distinction derived from it, we can take Frege's passage as simply one attempt to
explicate the distinction which would have been well known to Wittgenstein and his contemporaries.
\(^9\) Cf. Thompson, Wittgenstein on Phenomenology and Experience, 59f.
judgments.

For our purposes here, we can set aside the problem of Schlick's very simplified and problematic understanding of Husserl, and focus only on this basic view concerning the relation of synthetic a priori judgments to experience, the one Wittgenstein seems to have taken from Schlick as the Husserlian view. On that view, phenomenological observation—which is to be distinguished from the empirical-scientific observation such as that of the physicist—yields propositions which express judgments that are a priori, in the sense that they must be necessary preconditions of experience and not merely derived from it via induction; and synthetic, insofar as they manifest material relations between terms which are not already implied in their definitions.

As Wittgenstein recognized, this meant that phenomenological analysis must be distinguished from the process of induction from specific examples, since “experience decides whether a proposition is true or false, but not its sense.” It is for this reason that, in the conversations with Schlick and in the Remarks, Wittgenstein's conception of the difference between phenomenological experience [Erfahrung] and empirical inquiry [Empirie] is expressed in terms of meaning and possibility. Whereas natural sciences such as physics seek to establish natural laws, “phenomenology only establishes the possibilities. Thus, phenomenology would be the grammar of the description of those facts on which physics builds its theories.” For, “physics does not yield a description of the structure of phenomenological states of affairs. In phenomenology it is always a matter of possibility, i.e., of sense [Sinn], not of truth and falsity.” In this sense, phenomenology can be seen as the locus of a priori material content, the sense expressed in propositions prior to the ascription of truth value, that which, in the color-incompatibility problem, led Wittgenstein to retract the Tractarian thesis of the logical independence of elementary propositions.

II. The Synthetic A Priori and the Critique of Phenomenology in the Post-Investigations Period

Thus, although we cannot say for certain that Wittgenstein was aware of the specifics of phenomenological theory, it is clear that he was concerned with phenomenological problems. Indeed, in his last writings from the

11 For one such critique see Livingston, “Husserl and Schlick on the Logical Form of Experience.”
12 As Gier points out, it is Wittgenstein and not Schlick who specifically attributes the view to Husserl in the conversation recorded in *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle* (“Wittgenstein’s Phenomenology Revisited,” 275).
period after he finished work on the Investigations, Wittgenstein rejects the "science" of phenomenology, but sees in its field of inquiry a legitimate set of problems, namely, those involved in giving an account of the relation of his conception of grammar to immediate experience. My contention is that this concern is not the new problem of a so-called "third Wittgenstein," but a reappearance of the same issues which were shown above to be characteristic of Wittgenstein's brief but explicit flirtations with phenomenology in the early 1930s.

In a characteristic set of remarks from the first section of the Remarks on Color, Wittgenstein writes,

Opaqueness is not a property of the white colour. Any more than transparency is a property of the green. And it does not suffice to say, the word "white" is used only for the appearance of surfaces. It could be that we had two words for "green": one for green surfaces, the other for green transparent objects. The question would remain why there existed no colour word corresponding to the word "white" for something transparent.

To say that opaqueness and transparency are not properties of colors is to admit that they are not analytically implied in the color-concepts; that in the analysis of color-concepts, opaqueness and transparency do not arise on the basis of "general logical laws and on [the basis of] definitions." This is the same observation which arose in Ramsey's critique of the color incompatibility problem 25 years earlier. In Kantian terms, the relation (positive or negative) of opaqueness and transparency to colors must be synthetic.

But the above insight into color-concepts is also not simply a posteriori for Wittgenstein, for it is not merely the result of our never having happened to see an example of transparent white. It seems instead, like the incompatibility of red and green, to be a sort of logical impossibility: "Why can't we imagine transparent-white glass,—even if there isn't any in actuality? Where does the analogy with transparent coloured glass go wrong?"

The impossibility of transparent-white glass need not arise directly from actual empirical observation, and yet the above example does not seem necessarily to be the mere result of norms, as Wittgenstein immediately notes in the following remark:

Sentences are often used on the borderline between logic and empiricism [Empirie], so that their meaning changes back and forth and they count now as expressions of norms, now as expressions of experience [Erfahrung].

(For it is certainly not an accompanying mental phenomenon—this is how we imagine 'thoughts' [so stellt man sich den 'Gedanken' vor]—but the use, which distinguishes the logical proposition from the

16 "There is no such thing as phenomenology, but there are indeed phenomenological problems." Wittgenstein, Remarks on Color, I. §53.
17 Wittgenstein, Remarks on Color, I. §§45- 46.
18 Wittgenstein, Remarks on Color, I. §31.
experiential sentence [Erfahrungsatz].\textsuperscript{19} 

In these post-\textit{Investigations} remarks, Wittgenstein now deals with the incompatibility problem through his characteristic turn to \textit{use}. Instead of resorting to a grand theory of inner states or accompanying “mental phenomena” (and it is not unreasonable to take the scare quotes around “Gedanke” to be an allusion to Frege’s essay of that name, with its “third realm”), Wittgenstein in his last writings maintains the \textit{Investigations’} insistence on the “humble” use of language in the context of everyday forms of life, noting explicitly, “We do not want to establish a \textit{theory} of colour (neither a physiological one nor a psychological one), but rather the logic of colour concepts. And this accomplishes what people have often \textit{unjustly} expected of a theory.”\textsuperscript{20}

The questions raised by issues such as color-incompatibility are considered by Wittgenstein to be legitimate phenomenological problems. But to think that there could ever be a single \textit{theory}, an all-encompassing \textit{phenomenology} through which all such questions could be answered, would be for Wittgenstein to reassert the demand for the formal purity and logical non-interdependence of the \textit{Tractatus}, which, as we saw above, is what led him to the color-incompatibility problem in the first place. Instead, the attempt to establish the logic of color concepts is understood as an ongoing \textit{activity}; it is something we \textit{do}, and not a once-an-for-all exposition of the logic of the appearance—the literal \textit{logos} of the \textit{phenomena}—of color. This latter is just what for Wittgenstein was “unjustly expected of a theory.”

But our focus on the synthetic a priori character of such problems helps to show that we must also be careful not to turn the appeal to use and norms \textit{itself} into a sort of theory. The result would be to confuse the synthetic a priori with the (neo-) Humean a posteriori; to think that, in \textit{every} case, the answer is to be reached through a simple appeal to empirical data or the grammar of social norms. Wittgenstein instead insists that, in at least \textit{some} cases—such as the “phenomenological” cases involving color—there are aspects of the “logic of our concepts” which are not always to be considered the result of generalizations from past experience or of received social norms; that “in \textit{every} serious philosophical question uncertainty extends to the very roots of the problem. We must always be prepared to learn something totally new.”\textsuperscript{21} We see this clearly in the example from the \textit{Remarks on Color} cited above, where the notion that the incompatibility problem might be solved by a simple

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} Wittgenstein, \textit{Remarks on Color}, I. §32.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Wittgenstein, \textit{Remarks on Color}, I. §22 (my emphasis).
\item \textsuperscript{21} Wittgenstein, \textit{Remarks on Color}, I. §15.
\end{itemize}
appeal to rules of linguistic use is explicitly rejected: even if we appeal to common linguistic usage, “The question would remain why there existed no colour word corresponding to the word "white" for something transparent.”

But for Wittgenstein, phenomenological problems also lead, in his very last writings, to the rejection of the notion of a firm and fixed boundary between any such distinctions. His notion of logical or grammatical propositions must cover both Kant's analytic judgments and synthetic a priori propositions,\(^\text{22}\) and even this class of propositions cannot be neatly distinguished, once and for all, from propositions arising from experience [Erfahrungsätze]. Unlike phenomenology's direct equation of experience with synthetic a priori knowledge (at least as Wittgenstein seems to have understood it, through Schlick) and in opposition to the rigidity of Kant's analytic/synthetic distinction (at least as interpreted by Frege), the various forms of judgment, while highly important, need not be fixed for Wittgenstein: “is it not difficult to distinguish between the cases in which I cannot and those in which I can hardly be mistaken? Is it always clear to which kind a case belongs? I believe not.”\(^\text{23}\) Indeed, it is precisely the phenomenologically problematic cases, the cases where the distinctions blur, that lead Wittgenstein to this view, and which serve as conditions of the possibility of such boundaries being drawn at all: “Wouldn't one have to say, then, that there is no strong boundary between propositions [Sätze] of logic and sentences [Sätze] of experience? The lack of sharpness is just that [lack of sharpness] of the boundary between rule and sentence of experience. Here one must, I believe, remember that the concept of 'Satz' itself is not a sharp one.”\(^\text{24}\)

Thus, Wittgenstein's concern with the Kantian forms of judgment helps to explain why his engagement with phenomenological problems was far more than a merely fleeting concern. His ongoing engagement with such problems is instructive for our understanding of Wittgenstein’s own developing thought, and especially for his ultimate rejection of the strict distinctions of his early work in favor of the more fluid conception of the proposition and of judgment in his later work. In interpreting this development through Wittgenstein's critique of phenomenology and in terms of the problem of the synthetic a priori, we can gaining a better grasp of the largely Kantian issues which both united him with and separated him from the phenomenological tradition.

\(^\text{22}\) Cf. Garver, *This Complicated Form of Life*, 38ff.
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