

Intentionalism and phenomenal continua

PHIL 93507

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September 6, 2009

Are phenomenal continua possible?

Let a phenomenal continuum be a series of experiences such that there is a ‘noticeable difference’ (i.e., an introspectable difference) between the first and last, in the sense that it is in principle possible for someone having those experiences to tell the difference between them. (Another way to think about it is that the transition from one to the other would not be seamless.)

It is controversial that phenomenal continua, in this sense, are possible. To many it seems obvious that they are possible. But as we saw last time, if they are possible then there is a 3-member phenomenal continuum. And it is intuitively not obvious that there could be three experiences which satisfy the condition above. (Nor is it obvious that there could not be.)

One argument we discussed last time for the possibility of phenomenal continua was this: suppose that humans are never able to distinguish surfaces which differ in the mean wavelength of light they reflect (in some particular environment) by less than some amount – call it x – and can always distinguish surfaces which differ by more than x . Surely there must be some value x . Then come up with three surfaces which are such that the difference between each is less than x , and the difference between the first and third is more than x . Veridical visual experiences of these three surfaces will constitute a phenomenal continuum.

A problem with this argument is that it is not obvious that there be some value x . Perhaps color vision is quantized, in the sense that every phenomenal character is paired with some range of wavelengths, and every phenomenal character is distinguishable from every other phenomenal character. This is a way that color vision could be; and if it is this way, phenomenal continua are impossible.

(One might then press the argument by saying that even if human color vision is quantized, this is a contingent rather than a necessary truth; and if it is even possible for there to be perceivers whose vision was not quantized in this way, then phenomenal continua are possible. Is this convincing?)

Why does it matter? And does it really?

If phenomenal continua are possible, then it is possible for a pair of experiences to differ in phenomenal character despite there being no noticeable/introspectable difference between them. After all, if E1 has a different phenomenal character than E3, then E2 must differ in phenomenal character either from E1 or from E3. Suppose E2 differs from E1 in phenomenal character. Then E1 and E2 are a pair of experiences which differ in phenomenal character despite there being no introspectable difference between them.

This is relevant to our discussion of intentionalism, because transparency-based arguments for intentionalism typically rely on an inference from ‘phenomenal difference’ to ‘noticeable/introspectable

difference.’ And for the above reason, this inference fails if phenomenal continua are possible.

The inference can be saved (trivially) by stipulating that we’re only interested in differences in phenomenal character big enough to be noticeable. Let’s call these ‘substantial changes.’ Then what arguments of this sort establish is not intentionalism — the thesis that there can be no change in phenomenal character without a change in content — but rather the weaker thesis that there can be no substantial change in phenomenal character without a change in content.

This would still be a substantial thesis. In fact, it is a thesis which (as far as I know) every non-intentionalist would reject. That is, no one holds the view that there can be differences in phenomenal character without differences in content, but only when those differences in phenomenal character are not, in principle, noticeable or introspectable. Is there anything to recommend this view?

What does ‘noticeable’ mean?

A related worry concerns what we mean by ‘in principle’ noticeable or introspectable. Do we mean noticeable by a suitably attentive human being? Or noticeable by any possible creature capable of having experiences with the relevant phenomenal characters? Does it make sense to say that the difference between two of my experiences is not noticeable, in principle, to me, but is noticeable, in principle, to someone else?

One might argue that this is possible if we also assume that the two experiences differ in color content (i.e., differ in which color they represent the relevant surface as having): (i) it is surely possible for a pair of *objects* to be such that one subject can distinguish between their colors, but another cannot; (ii) the colors that objects are represented as having are available to introspection; so (iii) it is possible for two experiences which differ in what color they represent some object as having to be distinguishable to one subject, but not another.

Moreover, something stronger than (i) seems true: it seems that for any two distinct color properties, it is possible for some perceiver to be able to tell the difference between them. If this is right, then it seems that for any two *experiences* which differ in which color they represent a pair of objects as having, there is some subject who can notice a difference between the two experiences. So there must be a difference in ‘what it is like’ to have the experiences, and the two experiences differ in phenomenal character.

This seems to show that any difference in color content entails a difference in phenomenal character. Similar reasoning seems to apply to any property represented in experience which, like color, comes in degrees. (Maybe in the case of vision these include size properties and location properties.) So it seems that the converse of intentionalism holds for experiences which differ in the representation of such properties. (This is something we’ll come back to later.)