

# Indistinguishable phenomenal properties

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Let's now consider the possibility that we might simply identify phenomenal properties with the full representational properties associated with experience, and deny Distinctness/Distinguishability.

To many people, this view will seem like a somewhat crazy last resort. After all, think about the way that the notion of a phenomenal property is usually introduced. We say things like: A and B are instantiating the same phenomenal property iff what it is like to be A *is indistinguishable from* what it is like to be B — but if this is a legitimate way to explain the notion, then this just rules out the possibility of Distinctness/Distinguishability being false.

Two ways to press the worry:

1. What could it mean for A's situation to be indistinguishable from B's while what it is like to be A is distinct from what it is like to be B? Or, as Max Deutsch aptly puts the worry

“Our notion of phenomenal character seems essentially tied to our notions of *appearing the same as*, or *being perceptually indistinguishable from*. Things that are perceptually indistinguishable cannot give rise to phenomenally different perceptual experiences - this ought to strike one as a conceptual truth.”

In response, the main thing to note is that property identities can give us good reasons to distinguish between properties which we'd otherwise have had no basis for distinguishing between. The present idea is that we should identify phenomenal properties with certain representational properties — properties of sensing certain contents, and attending to certain objects and properties. If we do this, this explains what it could mean to say that We needn't be committed to the idea that we would have reasons which are independent of this property identity to claim that indistinguishable phenomenal properties could be distinct.

An analogy might help. Consider, for example, the identity between heat and mean molecular motion. Given that there are differences in mean molecular motion which are not even in principle detectable by human observers, it follows from this theoretical identity that there are differences in the heat of substances which are not even in principle detectable by human observers. But would these indistinguishable distinctions among heat properties been as readily acceptable prior to the theoretical identity in question being accepted? If not, then we might say that the present distinctions between

indistinguishable phenomenal properties are like this; we can see that there must be such distinctions once we recognize (i) that phenomenal properties are identical to representational properties and (ii) that there can be distinctions in representational properties which are not, even in principle, distinguishable by human subjects.

2. One might think that what we're interested in when we're discussing the nature of phenomenal properties just is some property which obeys Distinctness/Distinguishability. A proponent of this view might say:

Let's grant you your use of the term "phenomenal property." Perhaps, in your sense, there can be distinct but indistinguishable phenomenal properties; but I'm interested in a class of properties which can't be distinct without being indistinguishable. Let's call these "schmenomenal properties." Even if you can give a satisfactory treatment of phenomenal properties, this doesn't explain the nature of the schmenomenal properties — and this just leaves the core of the problem of phenomenal consciousness unsolved.

The problem with this line of reply is that one can't simply stipulate the existence of a class of properties in this way. In effect, the strategy for defining schmenomenal properties is to begin with a relation  $R$  — here, indistinguishability — and to say that the schmenomenal properties are that class  $C$  of properties which are such that, necessarily,  $x$  and  $y$  have their  $C$ -properties in common iff they are  $R$ -related. But, for any such relation, it's a substantive claim that such a class of properties exists.

This is not to deny that for any pair of  $R$ -related subjects, there must be some property that they have in common — for example, each will have the property of being  $R$ -related to something. But this doesn't ensure that there are is a class  $C$  of properties which is such that being alike with respect to  $C$  properties is not only necessary, but also *sufficient*, for being  $R$  related. (Plainly being indistinguishable from *something* is not supposed to be sufficient for sharing one's schmenomenal properties.) Hence there's no absurdity in denying that there are such things as schmenomenal properties.

But even if the foregoing suffices to make the rejection of Distinctness/Distinguishability intelligible, it doesn't show that this rejection is without its costs. Here are two:

- (i) this rejection entails externalism about phenomenal properties;
- (ii) the second is that this move leaves us without, in general, an explanation for the fact that one subject's phenomenal state is indistinguishable from another's.

We might deny (i): we might give the treatment of phenomenally silent properties recommended to the phenomenal content theorist. Then we don't have to distinguish between the phenomenal properties involved in, e.g., the two golf ball experiences. The only indiscriminable phenomenal properties which we need to distinguish between are those involving phenomenally sneaky properties — and it's not obvious that this forces us

to externalism about phenomenal character, since it's not obvious that the correct theory of, e.g., color representation will be an externalist one.

But suppose we concede (i). Then there are three things to be said. First, here again we might recall the example of the property identity involving heat. The idea that phenomenal properties are externalist is less surprising once we see that they are identical to representational properties, and that these are externalist. Second, a limited internalist thesis might be true: intrinsic duplicates might always instantiate indistinguishable phenomenal properties; perhaps this captures the intuition that advocates of phenomenal internalism are after. And third, there is no good argument for phenomenal internalism.

Objection (ii) is that the possibility of distinct but indistinguishable phenomenal properties leaves us without an explanation of the indistinguishability of, for example, the subjects of our two golf ball experiences. We can hardly explain the indistinguishability of these experiences in terms of the identity of phenomenal properties with representational properties, since the two subjects instantiate *distinct* representational and phenomenal properties, on the present view. This is a serious problem, since proponents of intentionalist theories of phenomenal properties often defend their view against, e.g., disjunctivist competitors, by saying that they but not their competitors have a ready explanation of the fact that hallucinations and veridical experiences can be indistinguishable. If the present sort of view is correct, this sort of explanation will be worryingly incomplete, since we won't have the relevant sort of explanation — in terms of sameness of representational properties — for every case of indistinguishability. (And indeed we can't even give the relevant explanation in the central case of hallucination, if hallucinations at least sometimes differ in contents from veridical experience.)

Some replies:

- Difference between the present approach and disjunctivist approaches.
- There's no general requirement to explain indistinguishability in terms of identity of some property. Why impose that requirement here?