

# Russellianism vs Fregeanism about the contents of experience

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Fregeans about the contents of perceptual experience, as I'm using that label, hold that there can be differences in the contents of perceptual experiences which correspond to no difference in the objects and properties represented as in the environment of the perceiver — that is because there can be differences in the modes of presentation by which objects and properties are represented which do not involve any difference in Russellian content.

Let's think for a second about the relationship between the modes of presentation which represent color properties and those properties themselves. There are two options here: either the modes of presentation rigidly designate the relevant color properties, or they don't.

Suppose first that they don't. Then it is possible for a pair of subjects to have color experiences whose content involves the same Fregean content — the same mode of presentation — but which represent different color properties. The intentionalist Fregean must hold that those subjects are phenomenally identical, since to do otherwise would be to say that phenomenal character does not supervene on content — which is just to endorse phenomenism, and reject intentionalism.

So the Fregean who thinks that senses non-rigidly designate color properties must hold that when we have a pair of subjects alike with respect to the contents of their color experiences but which differ with respect to the color properties their experiences represent, those subjects are phenomenal duplicates. But then the Fregean must admit that phenomenal duplicates can vary with respect to the color properties they represent as instantiated in their environment. And (a familiar point from the foregoing) it's hard to see how they can avoid claiming that phenomenal duplicates can vary *arbitrarily* with respect to the color properties they represent as instantiated, for two reasons: (i) inversion w/o misrepresentation, (ii) small differences add up to big ones.

So it seems that the Fregean who is an intentionalist and who thinks that senses non-rigidly designate color properties must accept the thesis of property variance — and hence also the thesis of phenomenal variance. And this means that she must (by the argument of the preceding chapters) admit the possibility of both Scenarios A and B.

How about the Fregean who claims that the relevant modes of presentation rigidly designate color properties? The Fregean, by definition, must claim that there are

differences in the content of perceptual experience which don't correspond to any difference in Russellian content — i.e., which don't correspond to any difference in the objects and properties the perceiver represents as in her environment. Now consider a pair of subjects who differ with respect to the Fregean content of their experience but not with respect to Russellian content. Must their experiences have the same phenomenal character, or not?

Suppose that they don't. Then there are a range of distinct phenomenal characters which experiences might have, even if those experiences have just the same Russellian content — and hence represent just the same objects and properties as in the environment of the perceiver. This does not immediately imply phenomenal variance, since it does not imply that *arbitrary* differences in phenomenal character are consistent with sameness in Russellian content, and hence sameness in color properties represented. But it does imply the following thesis:

*Fregean variance:* Possibly, two subjects have experiences with different color phenomenology, but which represent all the same properties as instantiated.

And one can argue from Fregean variance, using the falsity of the analogues of the interpersonal, time, and memory constraints, to the conclusion that consecutive experiences of a single subject can differ phenomenally despite agreeing with respect to their representation of all properties (not just the color properties) in the environment of the subject. This sort of scenario is not as spectacularly impossible as Scenario A — but it is still, I think, clearly impossible. Examine your own experiences. Can you imagine having a pair of consecutive visual experiences which differed phenomenally but in which the color of the represented object, and the lighting, and the background, and indeed every property of every object represented as in the environment, seemed just the same in the two experiences?

The Fregean who believes in rigidly designating senses can get around this problem by requiring that whenever a pair of experiences differs in Fregean but not Russellian content, the two experiences must be alike in phenomenal character. So, according to this sort of Fregean, there are pairs of experiences which have the following three characteristics:

- (1) they have the same phenomenal character;
- (2) they represent just the same objects and properties as in the environment of the perceiver (i.e., they have the same Russellian content); and
- (3) despite these similarities, they differ in sense.

I think that it is hard to get a handle on these supposed differences in Fregean sense. How could phenomenally identical representations of something be *different* modes of presentation of that thing?

Let's call this intuitive problem the "problem of vanishing senses." There are a couple of ways to make this more than an intuitive problem for the Fregean.

First: from the analogue of Frege's criterion for differences in sense.

The Fregean might respond that this test for difference in content is only supposed to provide a sufficient, and not a necessary, condition for difference in content — hence the fact that experiences with qualities (1) and (2) above fail this test does not entail that they have the same sense, and so does not entail that no experiences have all of qualities (1)-(3).

This is fair enough. But I think that this should still look a bit puzzling from the perspective of the Fregean. Why should experiences with qualities (1) and (2) *always* fail the test for difference in sense, if some such pairs really do differ in sense? I think that the Fregean owes an answer to this question, and I'm not sure what the answer could be.

Second line of argument: We're familiar from the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind with pairs of sentences, and pairs of beliefs, which (according to Fregeans) differ in sense but not Russellian content. One would expect the differences in sense that can (according to the present view) exist between experiences alike with respect to phenomenal character and Russellian content to line up with these differences. But they don't.

If the differences in sense between experiences did line up with the differences between beliefs, then we should expect it to be the case that, typically, when we have a pair of experiences which satisfy (1)-(3), the experiences could justify different beliefs. (After all, the Fregean will typically claim that, in some cases, a Hesperus-belief will justify other Hesperus-belief without justifying any Phosphorus-beliefs, and analogously for other beliefs which differ in Fregean but not Russellian content.) Hence we should expect that, at least sometimes, there could be a pair of subjects, *A* and *B*, alike but for the fact that their experiences at some time differed in sense (but not Russellian content or phenomenal character), who differed in which beliefs they were justified in forming. But I find this very hard to imagine. It seems to me that (again, holding fixed their background beliefs) a pair of subjects who have experiences which are alike in phenomenal character and in which objects and properties they represent as in the subject's environment will always also be alike in which beliefs they would be justified in forming.

Can we, for example, imagine such a pair of subjects, one of whom would be justified in forming the belief that Hesperus is over there but not the belief that Phosphorus is over there, and the reverse for the other? It seems to me not.

Similarly, if the postulated differences in sense between experiences lined up with the differences in sense between sentences, then we should expect it to be the case that, typically, when we have a pair of experiences which satisfy (1)-(3), there should be some sentence which truly reports the content of one, but not the other. But again, I think that we just don't find this. Consider again, the pair of subjects above, who are alike but for a difference in the sense of their current experience. Would it ever be correct to report the content of the experience of one, but not the other, with the words "Hesperus is over there"? It seems to me not.

This is bad on its own — but particularly bad if one's motivation for Fregeanism about the content of experience is Fregeanism about the content of thought + the desire to maintain a tight link between experience and thought.

We can think of the argument of this section as presenting the Fregean with the following dilemma:

