

Properties represented in experience

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March 4, 2012

1. NATURAL KINDS

One topic of recent interest has been the question of whether perceptual experiences can represent natural kind properties, like the properties of being water or being a pine tree. Susanna Siegel has done more than anyone to defend the view that they can; and her principal argument for this conclusion has employed what she calls ‘the method of phenomenal contrast.’

Basically, the idea is that we can mount a plausible argument for the claim that some type of property is perceptually represented if we can come up with a pair of experiences which differ phenomenally from each other, where this difference is best explained by a difference in the representation of some property of the type in question. Siegel suggests as an example two experiences of some pine trees, before and after acquiring an ability to recognize pine trees. After acquisition of this ability, the pine trees just seem to ‘stand out’; they become visually salient to you in a way that they weren’t before. This seems to be a phenomenal difference; and, if this sort of phenomenal difference must be explained by a difference in the representation of some property or other, the hypothesis that it is best explained by the fact that the second experience but not the first represents the property of being a pine tree seems quite plausible.

A weakness in this form of argument: the objection from a non-intermodal intentionalist.

A different argument for Siegel’s conclusion: Consider, for example, the pair of subjects imagined by Putnam’s famous ‘twin earth’ thought experiment, one of whom is looking at an actual sample of water, and the other of which is in a waterless environment in which a chemically distinct colorless odorless liquid — twater — fills the lakes and rivers.

It seems clear that the actual subject is, during and after his experience, in a position to have *de re* thoughts of the kind water. During the experience he can, after, demonstrate the kind by using a demonstrative phrase like ‘that stuff’; and he might entertain various hypotheses about that kind. He might, for example, come to believe of the kind that samples of it are composed primarily of H₂O molecules.

Much the same can of course be said about the subject on twin-earth, except that his *de re* thoughts are about the kind twater. He might also come to believe of twater that

samples of it are composed primarily of H_2O molecules — but his belief, unlike that of his earthling counterpart, would be false. Hence the two thoughts are not the same.

But neither is able to entertain the thoughts of the other — our earthling might well come to wonder whether there are other natural kinds which are perceptually indistinguishable from water, but this general thought would not be a way to have *de re* thoughts about *twater*, as opposed to the (presumably many) possible kinds which are possibly perceptually indistinguishable from water.

Hence, by Availability/Difference, it follows that the experiences of our two subjects differ in content. Given that the two experiences could be indistinguishable from the point of view of the subject — water and *twater*, after all, look just the same, and each could be viewing the relevant liquids in just the same conditions — it is hard to see what difference in content they might have other than the fact that one represents the kind water, and one represents *twater*. The case seems exactly parallel to the case of ball-A and ball-B.

As with the example of ball-A and ball-B, one might try to resist the argument by denying Availability/Difference, and arguing that kinds can be made available for thought by an experience without being part of the content of that experience, by standing in a certain causal relation *C* to the having of that experience. But the problems with seeing exactly what this relation *C* could be are parallel to those encountered in the last chapter.

Does this line of reasoning generalize to artefact kinds?

Two arguments against the view that we perceptually represent kinds:

1. Just as there can be distinct but indistinguishable natural kinds, objects of one kind can look quite different from one another. To get such an example, we need look no further than the example of water, which looks quite different at low temperatures (as ice) than it does at high temperatures (as steam). If we perceptually represent the kind water when presented with it in liquid form, then presumably we do the same when presented with it in solid and gaseous form. But now imagine having a visual experience of some ice, followed by a visual experience of some steam. If we do perceptually represent kind properties, then each experience will represent the kind water as before us. Hence one would think that it would be evident, on the basis of our perceptual experiences, that both the ice and the steam are of the same kind. But obviously nothing of the sort is evidence just on the basis of the perceptual experiences — children are surprised to learn that, e.g., snow is water.

If this argument works, it also shows that we don't perceptually represent objects. After all, we can imagine re-presenting ball-A, now cleverly disguised, to the subject discussed

in the preceding chapter. It will not be perceptually evident to the subject that she is being re-presented with the same golf ball.

Fortunately, this style of argument is not convincing, since it assumes that we have a kind of ability to invariably identify commonalities in the contents of our mental states that we just don't have. To see this, move from the case of perception to the case of belief. It is presumably uncontroversial that kind properties can be parts of the contents of beliefs. But now consider beliefs formed about the kinds present after the ice-experience and the steam-experience. These will involve the same kind; but this may well not be evident to the subject of the belief. And if this is true of belief, why not think that it is true of experience as well?

2. The idea that we represent kind properties violates Fallibility and Independence.

What, after all, makes A's experience an experience which represents ball-A, rather than ball-B, as white, round, etc.? Just that ball-A happened to be the ball in front of him. But if this explanation is general, then it might seem that it is impossible to perceptually represent o as thus and so without o being before one; and that violates Fallibility. Parallel remarks apply to natural kinds, and the explanation of why our earthling's experience represents the kind water whereas his twin-earthly counterpart does not.

However, we can come up with experiences which show that perceptual representation of objects and kinds is consistent with our Fallibility principles. A thirsty traveler might have an experience which represents water in the distance, even if there is no water there; one might have an experience which represents a recently deceased loved one sitting in his favorite chair, even if he's not there. These are enough to ensure compatibility with our Fallibility principles.

But these differ from ordinary cases of misperception.

First way: they depend on prior acquaintance. (Johnston)

Second-way: these are cases in which we represent an object or kind as present, and no such object or kind is present.

But one might wonder whether more garden-variety kinds of misrepresentation are possible — cases which are more analogous to illusions in which, e.g., an object really has a shape property, and is perceptually represented as having a shape property, but the shape property it is represented as having is different than the one it actually has. Could there be a case in which ball-A is in your environment, but you mistakenly represent it as ball-B? Or a case in which water is in your environment, but you mistakenly represent it as twater?

Possible example: cases of object and kind constancy.

A worry: these cases seem to be counterexamples to Demonstrative Availability; it is hard to summon special uses of demonstratives, as in the color case; the demonstratives seem invariably to refer to the object or kind that is really there.

One then wonders whether these are counterexamples to the Availability Requirement, which Demonstrative Availability was used to defend. But they are not, for the reason mentioned above, which is that for objects and kinds misperception requires prior acquaintance, which is sufficient to secure availability for thought. Hence even if these are counterexamples to Demonstrative Availability, they are counterexamples which prove the rule — the Availability Requirement — of which Demonstrative Availability is a special case.

2. APPEARANCE PROPERTIES

So far we've argued against the ideas that there can be variation in the phenomenal character of a color experience which is not also variation in its content (i.e., phenomenism), and that there can be variation in the content of a color experience which is not also variation in the objects and properties represented by the experience (i.e., Fregeanism). But these two ideas together entail that stock examples of spectrum inverted (or spectrum shifted) subjects must differ with respect to their representation of the properties of some object in their environment. And doesn't this entail, implausibly, that at least one of these subjects must be misperceiving?

This last step follows only with the help of two further assumptions: that the difference in the representation of properties is a difference in the representation of color properties; and that standard examples of monochromatic surfaces have only one color. Whether we can deny one of these assumptions depends, respectively, upon whether we perceptually represent some suitable non-color properties, and whether we represent color properties of a sort that distinct such color properties can be instantiated by ordinary examples of monochromatic surfaces.

Let's begin with the idea that the experiences of spectrum inverted subjects differ with respect to their representation of properties other than the color properties of the relevant surface. Let's, following Sydney Shoemaker, call the "extra properties" represented in perceptual experience *appearance properties*; these will be properties (roughly speaking) like the property of causing (or being disposed to cause) experiences with phenomenal character RED in me (or observers like me, or observers of a certain type) in normal conditions. Let's call the view that we can use these properties to make room for cases of inversion without phenomenism or Fregeanism *appearance property-ism*:

Appearance property-ism: in addition to color properties, color experiences represent appearance properties; apparent cases of spectrum inversion

without misrepresentation are cases in which the spectrum inverted subjects perceptually represent the same color properties as instantiated, but differ with respect to their perceptual representation of the appearance properties.

The foregoing gives us the materials for two quite different arguments against appearance-property-ist views.

The first begins with the impossibility of Scenarios A and B. Since appearance properties are introduced explicitly to solve inversion problems, the appearance property-ist must endorse the possibility that arbitrary differences in the phenomenal character of color experiences are, while incompatible with sameness of representation of appearance properties, compatible with sameness of representation of color properties. But this just is the thesis of phenomenal variance, which, by the argument above, entails the possibility of Scenario A, and (via property variance) the possibility of Scenario B.

Response: the argument just given is a bit *too* easy. After all, an appearance property-ist might say, how can we be so sure that Scenarios A and B really are impossible, once we have appearance properties on the table? Why, for example, are we so sure that psychedelic phenomenology really is inconsistent with sameness of representation of *color* properties, as opposed to sameness of representation of *appearance* properties? It might well seem to an appearance property-ist that any argument against her view which simply assumes the possibilities of Scenarios A and B is, in some objectionable sense, begging the question.

I can see why it would seem this way. But I have to say that this line of response strikes me as extremely unconvincing. If I add to the description of Scenario A that the subject is *also* visually representing some other properties of the wall as rapidly changing, that just doesn't make it any easier for me to believe that she is visually representing the color of the wall as constant. And, likewise, the fact that a subject is having a visual experience with phenomenal character CHARCOAL GREY *and* visually representing another property of the wall as constant seems just as plainly inconsistent with the subject visually representing the color of the wall as rapidly changing as Scenario B did in the first place.

A less table-thumping reply is to say that this derivation of the possibilities of Scenarios A and B from appearance property-ism is a way of substantiating a persistent, if somewhat vague objection to these views: the charge that these views make colors, in some sense or other, impossible to see, or hidden behind a veil of appearance properties.

Appearance property-ists typically reply by, first, pointing out that this complaint is as it stands purely metaphorical and, second, saying that there is a perfectly good sense in which we *do* see colors — we see them by seeing the appearance properties.

It seems to me that the present argument against appearance property-ism provides one way of spelling out the intuitive but vague objection. If appearance property-ism really

does entail that Scenario B is possible — and hence that it is possible for a subject to have an experience whose phenomenal character is a constant and monotonous GREY, while visually representing the color of the relevant object as first red, then blue, then green — then, it seems to me, there is a good sense in which the appearance property-ist *does* think of the colors as invisible.

A second argument is based on the Availability Requirement. So far, we've only used our discussion of Availability to liberalize our view of the contents of experience, by using Availability/Difference to argue that objects and natural kinds are parts of the contents of experience. But the Availability Requirement can be used to push in the other direction, by ruling out certain candidates for perceptually represented properties.

What, exactly, are appearance properties? There are several candidates. Using 'RED' as a label for experiences with the phenomenal character typical of our experience of red things, the first, and simplest, view of appearance properties identifies them with properties like 'the property of causing a RED experience in me now.' But this candidate violates Independence, since it is impossible for us to represent an object as instantiating this sort of appearance property unless it does.

A better idea is to identify appearance properties with certain dispositional properties like the one corresponding to the open sentence

[App-Red1] There are some perceivers and circumstances such that x is disposed to cause RED experiences in those perceivers in those circumstances

But this delivers some odd results. Presumably, by appropriately varying the perceiver or by varying the conditions of observation, every object will instantiate this appearance property. Presumably, whatever property experiences with these phenomenal characters represent, we should want the property attributed by my experiences with RED phenomenal character to be incompatible with the properties attributed by my experiences with GREEN phenomenal character. (This is so even if we want the property represented by my RED experiences to be compatible with the properties represented by an invert's GREEN experiences.) There are two reasons for this. First, it seems that when I look at a green thing and a red thing side by side, I can infer from the phenomenal character of my experience that (if the experience is veridical) the first thing is some way that the second is not. Second, if something can simultaneously instantiate both the appearance property associated with RED and the appearance property associated with my GREEN experiences, it would seem puzzling that I couldn't simultaneously visually represent the object as having both of these properties. But I can't.

A better proposal, perhaps, would be to appeal to more specific dispositional properties: properties which specify the relevant type of perceiver, and relevant type of circumstance, rather than existentially generalizing over types of perceivers and circumstance. On this view, they would be properties like that corresponding to the open sentence

[App-Red2] x is disposed to cause RED experiences in perceivers of type T in circumstances C

given some specification of the relevant type of perceiver and circumstance. This brings the idea that we perceptually represent appearance properties into conformity with Fallibility and Independence, and avoids the result that my RED experiences represent a property compatible with that attributed by my GREEN experiences, while keeping in place the crucial possibility that the property attributed by my RED experiences is compatible with that attributed by my invert's GREEN experiences — this last possibility is secured by the fact that the appearance property attributed by my invert's experiences will presumably involve a different type of perceiver than mine.

The problem with this candidate, though, is that it violates the Availability Requirement. However we fill in 'C' and 'T', it had better be impossible for an object to instantiate both App-Red2 and App-Green2, on pain of running into the problems with App-Red1. This means that we had better fill in 'C' and 'T' in such a way that, necessarily, if an object is has App-Red2, then in most circumstances of type C, x will cause a RED experience in observers of type T. (This is plausibly required by the truth conditions of disposition ascriptions in any case.)

The problem is that most normal color observers are in no position to specify the relevant types of observers and circumstances.

3. RELATIVE COLORS

Why the relativist about colors is forced to appeal to dispositions to appear a certain way to perceivers of a certain type; and why this makes relativism about colors open to the second objection to appearance property-ism.

Further question: how general is this argument against perception of dispositional properties?

Residual problem: if phenomenism, appearance property-ism, Fregeanism, and relativism are all false, what should we say about apparent cases of spectrum inversion without misrepresentation?