

Wrapping up spectrum inversion

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Remember our stock examples of spectrum-inverted subjects looking at a ripe apple, one of whom is having a phenomenal RED experience and the other of whom is having a phenomenal GREEN experience. There are five things we can say about such a case:

1. There is no difference in the contents of their experiences (and hence intentionalism is false).
2. There is a difference in the contents of experience, but only in the modes of presentation of properties, and not in the properties represented (and Fregeanism, rather than Russellianism, is true).
3. There is a difference in the properties represented, but not the color properties represented (and appearance property-ism is true).
4. There is a difference in the color properties represented, but still both perceivers can be getting it right (and color relativism is true).
5. There is a difference in the color properties represented, and hence at least one of the perceivers must be getting the color of the apple wrong.

#5 is the result that most think is to be avoided at all costs. It seems to me to be the right response to the case.

I have already said why I think that #1 and #2 are no good. Let's take a closer look at #3 and #4.

The appearance property-ist says that my experiences with phenomenal character RED represent properties like:

Appearance-red: the property of being disposed to cause phenomenal RED experiences in subjects of type T in circumstances C

and that these properties are distinct from colors, which are intrinsic properties of surfaces.

Color-relativism is in the first instance a thesis about the nature of color. It says that colors are properties like:

Relative-red: the property of causing a RED experience in Jeff Speaks in perceptual circumstances C.

This trivially gives us the result that spectrum inverters can represent the apple as having different colors and yet both can be right about its color: apples, on this view, have many many colors.

If colors so construed are the contents of visual experience, then this will make perceptual illusions surprisingly rare. To make room for such illusions — as well as phenomena like color constancy — the color relativist can appeal to “coarse-grained relative colors” — not the disposition to cause certain phenomenal properties to be instantiated by me in this circumstance, but rather the disposition to cause those properties to be instantiated by perceivers of certain types in certain circumstances. These “coarse-grained colors” thus look a lot like the things that appearance property-ists call “appearance properties.”

(Though Cohen does appeal to beliefs about coarse-grained colors, he does not commit himself to the claim that these are perceptually represented. But if we want to accommodate perceptual illusions, we’ll have to say this.)

Here is an objection to appearance property-ism and to the color relativist who makes use of coarse-grained colors: they violate the Availability Requirement. However we fill in ‘C’ and ‘T’, it will be implausible that most normal color observers are in a position to specify the relevant types of observers and circumstances; and these are certainly not available for demonstration.

Let’s consider some objections to this argument against these views:

1. This argument shows too much. It seems to show that we can’t even have *beliefs* about appearance properties and coarse-grained relative colors (at least without significant thought about the relevant perceptual types), since, trivially, every content of my beliefs is available for thought. I am inclined to accept this conclusion. (Though of course the fact that we can’t, without substantial work, have thoughts involving specific appearance properties does not show that we can’t have general, non de re thoughts about appearance properties.)

2. It’s possible to have thoughts involving dispositional properties without having conditions about specific conditions of manifestation. Can’t I, for example, believe that a glass is fragile without having any very specific beliefs about conditions of manifestation? If so, then why not think that this is what is going on in the case of perceptual representation of appearance properties/coarse relative colors?

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A further argument against both sorts of theories: if phenomenal properties are identical to certain representational properties, then we get weird results. In particular, a phenomenal property F will be identical to the property of standing in a propositional

attitude relation to something's having the property of being disposed to cause certain subjects to have F.

But this is odd. Can properties be constituents of themselves?

Further: consider the identity

F = the property of standing in a propositional attitude relation to something's having the property of being disposed to cause certain subjects to have F

If Russellianism is true, then this seems to entail

F = the property of standing in a propositional attitude relation to something's having the property of being disposed to cause certain subjects to have the property of standing in a propositional attitude relation to something's having the property of being disposed to cause certain subjects to have F

which in turn seems to entail

F = the property of standing in a propositional attitude relation to something's having the property of being disposed to cause certain subjects to have the property of standing in a propositional attitude relation to something's having the property of being disposed to cause certain subjects to have the property of standing in a propositional attitude relation to something's having the property of being disposed to cause certain subjects to have F

and so on. This entails that phenomenal properties are identical to arbitrarily complex representational properties which, presumably, none of us instantiate.

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Still, if these views are to be rejected, that might lead us to wonder what we should say about the cases of spectrum inversion discussed above. I just don't think that #5 is as bad as it is often taken to be.

It is often said that #5 involves unfairly privileging one of the subjects over the other. But this is wrong, since we might be color eliminativists and take both to be wrong. But even if we do say that one is right and one is wrong, it's not obvious that this is objectionable. After all, if things really have colors, and they two subjects represent the object as having different colors, what's wrong with saying that these facts alone explain 'what makes' one right and one wrong?

A comparison of the inversion case to familiar radical skeptical scenarios.