

A quick argument against phenomenism, Fregeanism, appearance property-ism, and (maybe) functionalism about perceptual content

Jeff Speaks

November 19, 2009

1 The basic argument

My aim in this paper is defend the soundness of a few instances of the following argument-schema:

Premise 1. The following scenarios are both impossible:

SCENARIO A

Psychedelic phenomenology + constant representation of color properties

A subject is looking intently at a well-lit surface which occupies the whole of the subject's visual field. Over the course of a few seconds, his experience goes from being (as we would put it, were we to describe the phenomenal character of the experience) bright-red-feeling to being bright-green-feeling to being bright-blue feeling, and constantly repeats this pattern. But, the whole time, he is visually representing the wall as yellow; it visually seems to him throughout that the wall is yellow; according to his experience, the wall is yellow throughout.

SCENARIO B

Constant phenomenology + psychedelic representation of color properties:

A subject is looking intently at a well-lit surface which occupies the whole of the subject's visual field. The only thing notable about the phenomenology of his experience of the surface is its monotony. The experience is charcoal-gray-feeling, and remains so for the duration of the experience. Nonetheless, the subject is visually representing the color of the wall as constantly changing from bright red, to bright green, to bright blue; it visually seems to him that the wall is changing from bright red, to bright green, to bright blue; according to his experience, the wall is changing from bright red, to bright green, to bright blue.

Premise 2. Theory X entails the possibility of one of these scenarios.

Conclusion. Theory X is false.

Any instance of this argument schema will be valid. Premise 1 seems to me very difficult to reject — at least if we grant that experiences have both phenomenal character and content — and I will not defend it here. Instead I will focus on the question of whether there are interesting theories about perception which, which substituted for ‘Theory X’, make Premise 2 of this argument schema true.

2 Phenomenism

I think that there are. Consider the following definition of *phenomenism* (sometimes called ‘anti-intentionalism’ or ‘anti-representationalism’):

Phenomenism: possibly, two subjects have experiences with different color phenomenology, but the same content.

For example, if we use RED as a name of the phenomenal character characteristic our experiences of ripe tomatoes and GREEN as a name of the phenomenal character characteristic of our experiences of healthy grass, the phenomenist might hold that it is possible for one subject to have a RED experience which represents the color red, and for another subject to have a GREEN experience which also represents the color red.¹

Why think that phenomenists are committed to the possibility of Scenario A? Scenario A is a case in which consecutive experiences of a single subject differ in their color phenomenology while agreeing in which color property they represent as instantiated. Accordingly, the phenomenist who accepts the possibility of the sort of spectrum inversion just sketched but who wants to deny the possibility of Scenario A must hold either that (i) while *interpersonal* phenomenal differences are consistent with sameness of color representation, this is impossible for two two experiences of a single subject, or that (ii) while it is possible for two experiences *separated by a certain minimal time interval t* may differ in color phenomenology while agreeing in color content, this is impossible for consecutive experiences of a single subject. That is, a phenomenist who wants to deny the possibility of Scenario A must accept one of the following two principles:

The interpersonal constraint

Two subjects can have experiences with different color phenomenology, but which represent the same property as instantiated; but this is not possible for two experiences of a single subject at different times.

The time constraint

A single subject can, at different times, have experiences with different color phenomenology, but which represent the same property as instantiated; but this is not possible for two experiences of a single subject which are separated by an interval of time less than some minimal interval t .

So, to defend premise 2 of the instance of our argument schema which substitutes ‘phenomenism’ for ‘Theory X’, it suffices to argue against the interpersonal constraint and the time constraint.

¹Phenomenism is defended in, among many other places, Block (1990).

Arguments against the interpersonal constraint are already widely accepted, in the form of arguments that if interpersonal spectrum inversion is possible, then intrapersonal spectrum inversion must be as well. Let A and B be distinct individuals whose experiences, by the anti-intentionalist's lights, differ in phenomenology but have the same content. Whatever the facts about these individuals are which determine the phenomenologies and contents of their mental states, can't we always imagine an individual sufficiently long-lived and protean that, at one stage in his life, he is identical in all relevant respects to A , and at another stage, is identical in all relevant respects to B ?²

If this is right, then phenomenism stands or falls with the time constraint. But the time constraint is a difficult thesis to maintain. Consider two experiences of a single subject, e_1 and e_2 , which are separated by the minimal time interval t . Because they are separated by t , it is possible that they differ in color phenomenology, but have the same color content; to fix ideas let us suppose that at the time of e_1 the subject is such that RED experiences represent the property red, and GREEN experiences represent the property green, whereas in e_2 the subject is such that RED experiences represent the property green, and GREEN experiences represent the property red.

But presumably it is possible for the subject to have a perceptual experience, e^* , during t , which has some color phenomenology – let us suppose that e^* has the phenomenal character RED. What is the content of e^* ? Since, by hypothesis, t is the minimal interval of time by which two experiences alike in color content but distinct in color phenomenology must be separated, e^* cannot represent the color red, since it is separated from e_2 by an interval less than t ; and because it is also separated from e_1 by an interval less than t , it cannot represent the property green. And e^* can't have some third sort of content since, as in the previous cases, this would violate the stipulation that t is the minimal interval of time by which two experiences alike in color content but distinct in color phenomenology must be separated.³

The argument above, if successful, shows that phenomenism entails the possibility of Scenario A. A related argument can be used to show that phenomenism entails the possibility of Scenario B — constant phenomenology + psychedelic content. It is plausible that phenomenism entails its converse:

Converse phenomenism: possibly, two subjects have color experiences which differ in content, but the same color phenomenology.

To see why, recall that phenomenism licenses the possibility of red-green spectrum inverted subjects who agree in their representation of the colors of things. Imagine that one of these subjects is looking at a ripe tomato and the other at healthy grass. They will each be (let's say) having RED experiences, but one will be representing the color property red,

²Not, you might think, if the content of the subject's experiences are determined by the evolutionary history of the states underlying those experience. See below for some of the problems which face this response.

³Could the defender of the time constraint stipulate that we can have a difference in color phenomenology without a difference in color content only when the relevant pair of experiences are separated by some interval t which itself contains no color experiences? This does not look promising. For consider a possible counterpart of our subject who is like the subject described above but that she *does* have an extra experience during the interval t . Given that this experience would have some content, it would follow that the having of this extra experience must entail a change in the content of either e_1 or e_2 . It can't be e_1 , since the contents of our experiences cannot be hostage to future developments. So the content of e_2 must be different. But it is hard to see why this must be so; why should the content of a color experience depend on whether one has had another color experience in the recent past?

and the other representing the color property green; hence they will be having experiences which differ in color content, despite having the same color phenomenology.

But then the argument from converse phenomenism to the possibility of Scenario B exactly parallels the above. To block this argument the converse phenomenist will have to endorse the analogue of either the interpersonal constraint or the time constraint, and the analogues of these theses will be just as difficult to accept as the originals.

3 Fregeanism and appearance property-ism

Somewhat surprisingly, the above form of argument can also be used against some anti-phenomenist (i.e., intentionalist) views of perception which recognize a necessary connection between phenomenology and content. In particular, it can be used against those intentionalists who try to make room for the possibility of spectrum inversion without misrepresentation by taking a view of the contents of color experiences on which two color experiences can differ in content without differing in which color property they represent as instantiated by the relevant surface.

There are two main versions of intentionalism which have this goal. The first is the *Fregean* view that there are differences in content which do not entail any difference in which objects and properties are represented in the environment of the perceiver, but only involve a difference in the mode of presentation of those objects and properties. The Fregean might then describe apparent cases of spectrum inversion without misrepresentation as cases in which the spectrum-inverted subjects represent the same color property under different modes of presentation.⁴

A different option for the intentionalist friendly to the possibility of spectrum inversion without misrepresentation is to say that in addition to representing color properties, color experience also represents a different class of properties — since these are often called ‘appearance properties’, for lack of a better term I’ll call this view *appearance property-ism*. Cases of spectrum inversion without misrepresentation are then to be understood as cases in which the spectrum inverted subjects perceptually represent the same color properties as instantiated, but differ with respect to their perceptual representation of appearance properties.⁵

Both Fregeanism and appearance property-ism entail the following claim:

The common claim: Possibly, two subjects have experiences with different color phenomenology, but represent the same color properties as instantiated.

They will explain the possibility of subjects of this sort differently — the Fregean in terms of differences in the modes of presentation under which the color properties are presented, and the appearance property-ist in terms of differences in which appearance properties are represented — but the above claim is common ground.⁶

However, given the common claim, presuming that the Fregean and the appearance property-ist agree that Scenario A is impossible, they must hold that the relevant phenomenal differences are compatible with sameness of color property represented either (i)

⁴For this to work, the modes of presentation of color properties must not be rigid designators of those color properties; I’ll assume this in what follows. This sort of Fregean treatment of spectrum inversion is defended in Chalmers (2004), Thompson (2009), and Bayne (2009), 398.

⁵For defenses of appearance property-ism, see Shoemaker (1994, 2000) and Egan (2006).

⁶In fact, the common claim seems to be entailed by any view which permits inversion without misrepresentation other than views which make room for this via relativism about color.

in the case of a pair of subjects but not in the case of two experiences of a single subject, or (ii) in the case of a pair of experiences of a single subject separated by some minimal interval of time, but not in the case of consecutive experiences of a single subject. That is, the Fregean and the appearance property-ist must endorse either the interpersonal constraint or the time constraint; but we've already seen that each of these theses is very implausible.

Moreover, just as phenomenism can be shown to entail the possibility of Scenario B via converse phenomenism, so the common claim (for parallel reasons) seems to entail its converse; which means that Fregeanism and appearance property-ism, if the above argument is correct, seem committed to the possibility of Scenario B as well as A.

4 Functionalism

I think that there is one more target against which this general sort of argument can be aimed. This target is a bit less easy to specify than phenomenism, Fregeanism, and appearance property-ism, since it is a collection of views rather than a single thesis about perceptual representation. The collection of views in question may be lumped together under the heading of 'externalist functionalist theories of perceptual content.' These theories are functionalist because they hold that the content of a perceptual state depends upon the relational properties of that state and externalist in that they hold that these relational properties include relations to things external to the subject of the experience. The following are all well-known versions of externalist functionalism, as applied to the case of perceptual experience:

1. *Indication theories*: the content of a perceptual state is determined by what would cause the subject to be in that state, were the subject in optimal conditions.
2. *Asymmetric dependence theories*: a mental representation represents a property if the law L connecting instantiations of the property with tokenings of the representation is such that all other laws governing tokenings of that representation depend on L , and L depends on none of them.
3. *Teleological theories*: the content of a perceptual state is determined by the state of affairs which is such that the state was evolutionarily advantageous because of its being triggered by that state of affairs.

To argue against views of this sort, we need a further substantial assumption:

Internalism about phenomenal character: the phenomenal character of a subject's experiences supervenes on the subject's intrinsic properties + the laws of nature.

Egan and John (ms.) and Byrne and Tye (2006), among others, have pointed out that intentionalism, internalism about phenomenal character, and certain externalist theses about perceptual representation are jointly inconsistent; but this leaves open which of the trio should be rejected. Many philosophers find internalism about phenomenal character difficult to reject, and I will follow them in assuming it here. If we assume this thesis, we can use the impossibility of Scenario A to show, not just that the trio is inconsistent, but that the externalist theories of content sketched above are false. And we can do so, in this case, without assuming the falsity of the interpersonal and time constraints.

Consider the physical state S_{RED} which underlies my experiences with phenomenal character RED, and the physical state S_{GREEN} which underlies my experiences with phenomenal character GREEN. We may suppose that, for me, S_{RED} indicates redness, that its tokening asymmetrically depends on instantiations of redness, and that it was selected for thanks to its being triggered by redness; and analogously for S_{GREEN} . But be that as it may, there is no reason why a pair of states *cannot* indicate the same state of affairs, asymmetrically depend on the same property, or be selected for thanks to their reliable indication of the same state of affairs; and, in particular, it seems that there is no reason why there cannot be a subject for whom both S_{RED} and S_{GREEN} bear these relations to the same color — say, the color orange. Were such a subject possible, psychedelic phenomenology + constant content would be possible; we need only imagine the subject as alternating between the two states S_{RED} and S_{GREEN} . Given internalism about phenomenal character, the phenomenal character of his experience would rapidly switch back and forth between RED and GREEN; and given the truth of any of the three externalist functionalist theories above, he would be representing the scene before him as orange throughout. But this is impossible; hence the three theories of content above must be false, at least for the case of perceptual representation.

Now, just because the three views above entail the possibility of psychedelic phenomenology + constant content, it does not follow that all externalist functionalist theories do. Here’s a fourth theory which seems a natural way to block the problem:

4. *Covariational theories*: the content of a perceptual state is determined by the state of affairs with which the state would covary, were the subject in optimal conditions.

By insisting on *covariation*, theories of this sort block the possibility that our pair of physical states S_{RED} and S_{GREEN} could both represent a single color. This is a good thing. But other odd consequences result.

Simply moving to a covariational theory does nothing to remove the intuition that the sort of case described is possible: one in which both S_{RED} and S_{GREEN} indicate a single color — say, redness. This would then be a case, if the covariational theory were true, in which neither S_{RED} nor S_{GREEN} would covary with a color, and hence would be a case in which neither represents a color. But now imagine, what is surely possible, that some other states, which we can call S_{ORANGE} and S_{YELLOW} , do covary with colors — with orange and yellow, respectively. But in this kind of case, if the covariational theory is to be believed, if the subject is looking at a screen with colors being projected upon it, and her experience switches from yellow phenomenology to orange phenomenology to red phenomenology, what has happened is that the screen first visually seemed yellow to the subject, then visually seemed orange to the subject, and then ceased to seem to have any color at all. This is hard to believe. Surely the switch from orange phenomenology to red phenomenology can’t be a switch from representing the relevant surface as having a color to simply failing to do so.

It seems to me plausible that some problem of this sort will arise for every externalist functionalist theory of perceptual content, though I have not offered any argument for that general conclusion here. This seems to pose a general problem for functionalism about perceptual representation, since even more ‘internalist’ versions of functionalism, like conceptual role semantics, typically appeal to one of the four theories sketched above in giving their account of the content of perceptual experience.⁷

⁷See, for example, Loar (1981), 65.

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