

# An argument against phenomenism, Fregeanism, and appearance property-ism

1. The basic argument
2. Phenomenism
  - 2.1. Phenomenal variance entails the possibility of Scenario A
  - 2.2. The equivalence of phenomenal variance and property variance
  - 2.3. Property variance entails the possibility of Scenario B
3. Fregeanism
4. Appearance property-ism

## 1. THE BASIC ARGUMENT

**Premise 1.** The following scenarios are both impossible:

Scenario A	Scenario B
<i>Psychedelic phenomenology + constant representation of color properties</i>	<i>Constant phenomenology + psychedelic representation of color properties</i>
<p>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 (BRIGHT RED, for short) to being BRIGHT GREEN to being BRIGHT BLUE, and constantly repeats this pattern.</p> <p>And the subject’s memory is working normally — it’s working pretty much the way yours usually does when you have an experience lasting a few seconds. But, the whole time, he is visually representing the wall as red; it visually seems to him throughout that the wall is red; according to his experience, the wall is red throughout.</p>	<p>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 phenomenal character of the experience is CHARCOAL GREY, and remains so for its duration. And the subject’s memory is working normally — it’s working pretty much the way yours usually does when you have an experience lasting a few seconds. Nonetheless, the subject is visually representing the color of the wall as rapidly 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.</p>

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

**Conclusion.** Theory X is false.

The argument is valid, and it is hard to reject Premise 1.

Our main question is: are there interesting theories about perception which, substituted for ‘Theory X’, make Premise 2 of the basic argument true?

## 2. PHENOMENISM

I think that there are. Consider, e.g., the thesis that the phenomenal character of color experience does not supervene on its content:

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

Phenomenism is the negation of the (restricted) intentionalist thesis that any two color experiences alike in content must also be alike in their phenomenal character. Proponents of phenomenism should also endorse a stronger claim:

*Super-phenomenism*: possibly, two subjects have experiences with *arbitrarily* different color phenomenology, but the same content.

Why should phenomenists be super-phenomenists? Two reasons:

- ▶ Phenomenists want to accommodate the possibility of spectrum inversion without misrepresentation. But this requires not just phenomenism, but super-phenomenism.
- ▶ If (i) small phenomenal differences are compatible with sameness of content and (ii) this is true of any sufficiently small phenomenal difference, we can derive super-phenomenism.

### 2.1. Phenomenal variance entails the possibility of Scenario A

To see why super-phenomenism leads to the possibility of Scenario A, it will be convenient for what follows to focus on a thesis entailed by super-phenomenism:

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

Phenomenal variance entails the possibility of Scenario A unless one of the following is true:

<i>The interpersonal constraint</i>	Two subjects can have experiences with arbitrarily different color phenomenology, but which represent the same color properties as instantiated; but this is not possible for two experiences of a single subject.
<i>The time constraint</i>	A single subject can, at different times, have experiences with arbitrarily different color phenomenology, but which represent the same color properties 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 $t$ .
<i>The memory constraint</i>	A single subject can have experiences with arbitrarily different color phenomenology, but which represent the same color properties as instantiated, so long as those two experiences are not related by a certain memory relation $M$ ; but this is not possible for two experiences of a single subject which are connected by $M$ .

So, to defend premise 2 of the instance of our argument schema which substitutes ‘phenomenism’ for ‘Theory X’, it suffices to argue against these three theses.

*Argument against the interpersonal constraint*

Consider two subjects,  $A$  and  $B$ , having perceptual experiences which differ in phenomenology but not in content. If we consider sufficiently long-lived and protean individuals, it will always be possible to imagine a single subject who is at one time relevantly just like  $A$  and at another time relevantly just like  $B$ .

*Argument against the time constraint*

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 arbitrarily in color phenomenology, but represent the same color properties as instantiated; 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 must have 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, by varying the description of  $e_1$  or  $e_2$ , we could again generate a violation of 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.

*Reply:* stipulate that  $t$  must be an *experienceless* interval. Two arguments against this modified time constraint: (i) from arbitrariness; (ii) from borderline cases.

*Argument against the memory constraint*

Consider two experiences of a single subject,  $e_1$  and  $e_2$ , which are not related by the relevant memory relation  $M$ . Because they are not  $M$ -related, it is possible that they differ arbitrarily in color phenomenology, but have represent the same color properties as instantiated; let’s again 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 memory relations are in general not transitive; it is possible to remember some earlier experience, at which time you remembered some experience which you now can't remember. So presumably it is possible that between  $e_1$  and  $e_2$  you have a perceptual experience,  $e^*$ , which is  $M$ -related to both  $e_1$  and  $e_2$ . But then we can argue in a way parallel to the argument against the time constraint that any assignment of content to  $e^*$  will contradict the memory constraint.

*Reply.* This turns on the fact that ordinary memory relations are not transitive. But we can define a transitive memory relation, e.g. as follows:

$e_1$  and  $e_2$  are indirect- $M$ -related iff there is some finite series of experiences such that (i)  $e_1$  is the first and  $e_2$  is the last, and (ii) every experience in the series other than  $e_1$  is  $M$ -related to an earlier experience in the series.

and formulate the memory constraint using indirect- $M$  rather than  $M$ . Two objections: (i) worries analogous to those raised for “experienceless interval” theories; (ii) the problem of later experiences which are  $M$ -related to each of two earlier experiences which were not, prior to that, indirect- $M$ -related.

## 2.2. The equivalence of phenomenal variance and property variance

That gets us from phenomenism to the possibility of Scenario A — how about Scenario B? Consider the relationship between phenomenal variance and the reverse claim:

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

A plausible argument (as others have in effect noted in different contexts) can be made that phenomenal variance and property variance are equivalent:

*That phenomenal variance entails property variance:*

Imagine (as phenomenal variance tells us is possible) that  $A$  is having an experience with phenomenal character RED which represents the color property redness as instantiated, and  $B$  is having an experience with phenomenal character GREEN which also represents redness as instantiated. Now let  $A$  go on to have an experience with phenomenal character GREEN; presumably it is possible that this represent the color property green (just imagine that  $A$  is a normal human subject), which entails (given the facts about  $B$ 's experience) that a pair of experiences can be alike in phenomenal character and differ arbitrarily with respect to which color property they represent as instantiated. And this just is property variance.

*That property variance entails phenomenal variance:*

Imagine (as property variance tells us is possible) that *A* is having an experience with phenomenal character RED which represents the color property redness as instantiated, and *B* is having an experience with phenomenal character RED which represents greenness as instantiated. Now let *A* go on to have an experience with phenomenal character GREEN; presumably it is possible that this represent the property greenness. (Just imagine that *A* is a normal human subject.) Then *B*'s experience and *A*'s second experience both represent the color property green as instantiated, despite differing widely in their phenomenal character. And this just is phenomenal variance.

### 2.3. Property variance entails the possibility of Scenario B

So the phenomenist should be a super-phenomenist, the super-phenomenist must endorse phenomenal variance, and phenomenal variance is equivalent to property variance. But property variance entails the possibility of Scenario B unless one of the following three claims is true:

<i>The reverse interpersonal constraint</i>	Two subjects can have experiences which represent arbitrarily different color properties as instantiated, but which have the same phenomenal character; but this is not possible for two experiences of a single subject at different times.
<i>The reverse time constraint</i>	A single subject can, at different times, have experiences which represent arbitrarily different color properties as instantiated, but which have the same phenomenal character; 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 <i>t</i> .
<i>The reverse memory constraint</i>	A single subject can have experiences which represent arbitrarily different color properties as instantiated, but which have the same phenomenal character, so long as those two experiences are not related by a certain memory relation <i>M</i> ; but this is not possible for two experiences of a single subject which are connected by <i>M</i> .

Arguments against these are parallel to the arguments given above.

### 3. FREGEANISM

The impossibility of Scenarios A and B can also be used to argue against certain views about the content of experience which are usually taken to be consistent with (or even required for the defense of) intentionalism. For example:

*Fregeanism:* there are differences in content which do not entail any difference in which objects and properties are represented as in the environment of the perceiver, but only involve a difference in the mode of presentation of those objects and properties.

Given the argument of the preceding section, let's assume that the Fregean is an intentionalist. There are two versions of Fregeanism to consider, depending on whether the modes of presentation which figure in color experience do, or do not, rigidly designate color properties.

Against Fregean intentionalism + non-rigid senses: If senses are non-rigid, then it is possible for a pair of subjects to have experiences with the same Fregean content but which represent different color properties as instantiated. These subjects will, by intentionalism, be phenomenal duplicates. But then (a familiar point from the foregoing) it's hard to see how we can avoid claiming that phenomenal duplicates can vary *arbitrarily* with respect to the color properties they represent as instantiated, for two reasons:

- ▶ Need arbitrary variance to make room for inversion without misrepresentation.
- ▶ The possibility of lots of small variations in property represented + sameness of phenomenal character entails the possibility of wide variation + sameness of character.

So the Fregean who goes for non-rigid senses must endorse property variance — and hence also, given their equivalence, phenomenal variance, and the possibility of Scenarios A & B.

So suppose we go for rigidly designating senses. There are again two options to consider here. 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?

If not, then the Fregean must accept:

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

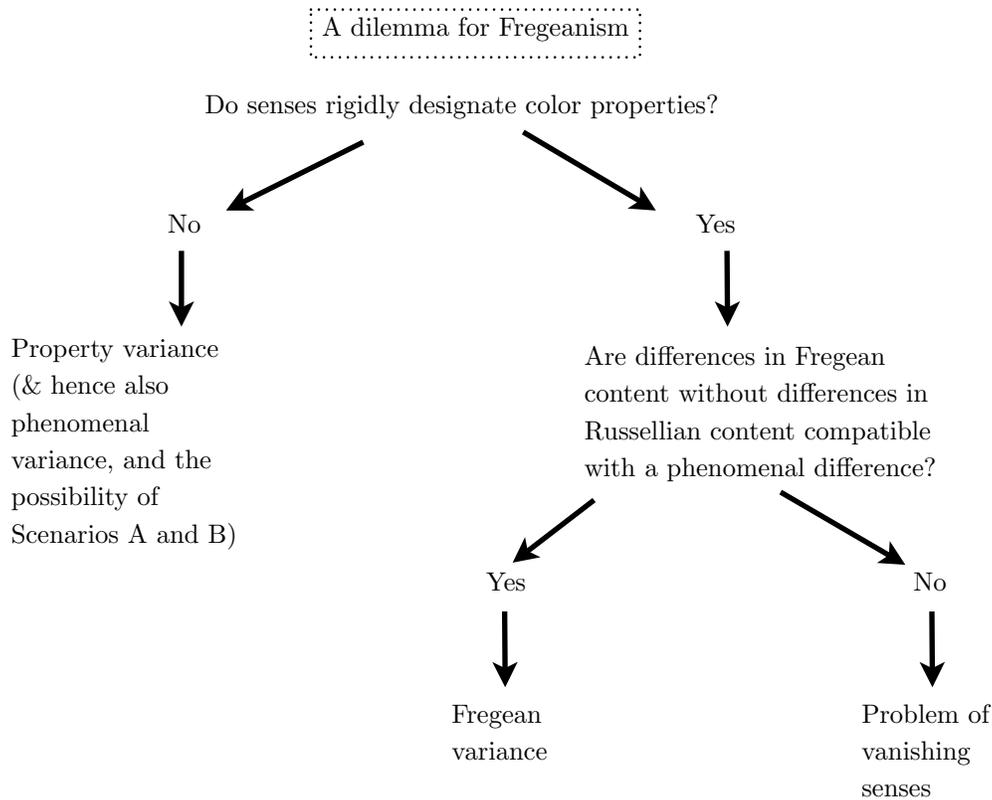
which is open to objections related to the objections to phenomenal variance.

If so — and phenomenal character supervenes on Russellian content — then there must be pairs of experiences with 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.

But it is hard to see how an experience could have all three of these characteristics, because it is hard to see how there could be genuinely distinct, but phenomenally identical, modes of presentation of an object or property. Call this the problem of “vanishing senses.”

The problem for Fregeanism can be summed up as follows:



#### 4. APPEARANCE PROPERTY-ISM

The foregoing + the apparent possibility of inversion without misrepresentation might lead us to endorse:

*Appearance property-ism:* in addition to color properties, color experiences represent appearance properties; 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.

But this entails phenomenal variance, which entails the possibility of Scenario A, and (via property variance) Scenario B.

*Reply:* this argument is question-begging, because it assumes the impossibility of Scenarios A and B. Two objections: (i) Really? (ii) a less table-thumping objection: this argument gives us a way of substantiating the standard but unsatisfyingly metaphorical objection that appearance property-ism makes the colors “hidden” behind a veil of appearance properties.