Phenomenal Character Revisited

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I am grateful to Michael Tye for his discussion of my book, and to the editor for offering me the opportunity to respond to Tye’s criticisms of my account of the phenomenal character of perceptual experience—especially since this prompted reflections that led me to see a way of removing one unattractive feature of the account.

The view Tye criticizes in his review is the view I think one must hold if one thinks that the following is a possible case: (1) under the same circumstances, object X looks different to persons A and B with respect to color, and (2) neither A or B is misperceiving X. I take (1) and (2) to imply that X has two different properties, one perceived by A and one perceived by B, and that it is X’s (veridically) appearing to them to have these properties that constitutes its looking to them, with respect to color, the ways it does. It is these properties I have called “phenomenal properties,” and hold to be different from colors (the object having only one color). The phenomenal character of experiences, I claim, consists in its representing such properties.

The case of (1) and (2) I have focused on in previous discussions of this is the hypothetical (and controversial) case of spectrum inversion. But we needn’t assume the possibility of spectrum inversion in order to see the need of an account that invokes such phenomenal properties. We need it, I think, in order to account for actual differences between color perceivers. It is a fact that different people often differ slightly in what lights, and what reflectances, they perceive as unique hues.1 What one person perceives as unique blue another may perceive as a slightly greenish blue. This is due to slight differences in the ways their visual systems process visual input. Where there is this sort of difference between two people, there is no basis on which one can say that one of them sees the color of an object correctly and the other is misperceiving it—nothing in the reflectances, or in the light, corresponds to the difference between unique and nonunique hues.2 But the object does look

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different to them. Since they are not misperceiving, the object must have two different properties, one veridically perceived by one of them and the other veridically perceived by the other. And the only plausible candidates for these are relational or dispositional properties. Neither of these properties is the color, since they perceive the same color.

Tye says that “distinguishing between the experienced character of a color and the color itself effectively draws a veil over the colors. Drawing this veil is tantamount to erecting an appearance-reality distinction for the colors themselves.” But to say that there is such an appearance-reality distinction suggests that there is a unique way a color would look if one were perceiving it “as it is,” and that in the case just described at least one of the perceivers would be misperceiving the color that they perceive differently. And of course my account denies this. Insofar as colors are nonrelational properties of objects, there is no way a color looks simpliciter; there are only the ways it looks to observers with visual systems of certain sorts. To a first approximation, an object’s having a phenomenal color property just is its looking a certain way to certain perceivers in virtue of having a certain color, and this normally amounts to the color of the object presenting itself in one of the ways it can present itself. (I say “normally” to allow for the case of color blindness.) So it is quite wrong to say, as Tye does, that on this view the colors “are not basically seen,” and that the relation of the phenomenal property to the color is analogous to that of the facing surface of a table to the whole table. Nothing in the account implies that it is epistemically possible, or even logically possible, that things should have such phenomenal qualities without having colors.

There is no reason why this account cannot allow that a person misperceives an object as having a certain phenomenal property, in just the circumstances in which she misperceives it as having the color which, having the visual system she does, she perceives by perceiving that phenomenal property. If in normal circumstances the person perceives the members of a certain class of reflectances as unique blue, and owing to unusual illumination she perceives a member of this class as (say) green, then her perceptual experience represents it as having both a phenomenal property and a color that it does not have.

Tye mentions what had seemed to me the most counterintuitive consequence of my account—that phenomenal properties, being relational properties things have in virtue of producing (in certain circumstances) experiences of certain sorts, are possessed by objects only when they are being perceived. The account would not have this consequence if it held that phenomenal properties are dispositional properties. I had mistakenly thought that this is ruled out. A given phenomenal property cannot be a disposition to produce an experience of a qualitative certain sort in all sorts of visual perceivers; there are no such dispositions. And it cannot be a disposition to produce an experi-
ence of a certain qualitative sort in perceivers having a visual system with a
certain makeup—this would rule out the sort of spectrum inversion in which
creature A perceives things of one color as having a certain phenomenal prop-
erty and creature B, having a somewhat different visual system, perceives
things of a different color as having that same phenomenal property. But I
overlooked an obvious possibility. Each phenomenal property could be
defined, not as a disposition to produce a certain sort of experience in all
visual perceivers, and not as a disposition to produce such experiences in
visual perceivers having a visual system with a certain makeup, but as a dis-
position to produce such experiences in creatures with visual systems of one
or more sorts. This permits creatures with different visual system to perceive
the same phenomenal properties. And it permits objects to have phenomenal
properties at times when they are not observed. It still has one counter-
intuitive consequence: different phenomenal properties, which cannot simul-
taneously be perceived by the same observer as belonging to the same
surface, can nevertheless belong to the same surface, and it will not be
possible to perceive the absence of a phenomenal property by perceiving the
presence of a different one. But the original version of my account had that
consequence as well. One would of course like an account which has no
counterintuitive consequences. But in the case of color perception there is no
chance of having that.