

Comments on James John's "Representationalists Should Be Primitivists"

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### *1. Introduction*

James John argues that representationalists about the phenomenal properties of perceptual experience should accept that colors are primitive, *sui generis* properties. Since both *pure* and *mode-of-presentation-impure* (MOP-impure) versions of representationalism fail, and since the remaining plausible candidate, *modality-impure* (MOD-impure) representationalism, implies that colors are primitive irreducible properties, representationalists are committed to primitivism. The argument has three key stages. First, pure representationalism is unable to distinguish contentful cognitive states, such as occurrent thoughts, that lack phenomenal properties from experiential states that share that content but possess phenomenal properties. Second, introducing *visual modes of presentation* under which properties are represented makes the qualitative aspects of the experience of color properties a matter of the modes of presentation, and thus renders the colors themselves "qualitatively blank". Representationalism that builds a *specification of the perceptual modality* into the account of phenomenal properties, however, avoids stripping colors of their qualitative characters. Awareness of a sensible qualitative property, and not an aspect of the way of experiencing, explains the qualitative aspect of color experience. This position comports better with introspective evidence about how things seem to be, and so is preferable to MOP-impure representationalism. Finally, since colored objects do not seem, in a phenomenologically accessible sense, e.g., to be disposed to reflect light at each wavelength across the visual spectrum in some determinate proportion, color vision does not represent

physical properties. Instead, colors look to be simple qualitative properties. Since vision represents colors, colors are irreducible *sui generis* properties at best nomologically correlated with physical or dispositional properties.<sup>1</sup>

I'll begin with two problems faced by the MOD-impure representationalist, in general, then discuss whether the MOD-impure representationalist can avoid primitivism.

## 2. *Color constancy*

Given color constancy, objects typically look to be the same color across a range of lighting conditions. A tomato in sunlight looks to be the same color as the tomato in shade. The same frequently applies to regions of an object. One region of the tomato looks to be the same color as another, though one region is sunlit and the other is shaded. Nonetheless the appearance of the two regions differs. Given color constancy, the phenomenal properties of the experience differ despite no difference in representational properties.

The MOP-impure theorist might explain the phenomenal difference in terms of different visual modes of presentation under which the redness of each region is represented.<sup>2</sup> The MOD-impure theorist must capture the difference in terms of properties represented. Four unappealing options exist. (i) The two regions are represented as different in color. This fails to capture color constancy: the tomato looks to be uniformly colored. (ii) The two regions are represented as the same in color, and, despite how I've described the case, the experience of each region is phenomenally alike. This fails to capture the difference in appearance. (iii) The colors

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<sup>1</sup> Two notes. First, John does not claim that such properties ever are instantiated, so the view as developed is compatible with both realist and eliminativist versions of primitivism. I'll assume the version under discussion is realist. Second, John does not tackle the issue of causal constraints on perceptual representation. Physicalists frequently are thought to have the advantage here, but the matter is far from settled.

<sup>2</sup> Brad Thompson, "Color Constancy and Russellian Representationalism," forthcoming, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.

experienced are light-relative properties. This captures constancy and appearances, but makes colors relations to lighting conditions. This fails to comport with introspective evidence. (iv) Perhaps multiple properties are perceptually represented: the colors and perspectival colors. The tomato's surface looks to be uniform red, but its regions are represented to have different perspectival properties that capture the different appearances. Perhaps describing a level of perspectivally-relational represented properties could save MOD-impure representationalism, but the cost is giving up a simple view of color experience on which phenomenal differences correspond to differences in the representation of colors.

### *3. Intermodal sharing*

However the MOD theorist chooses to deal with purported phenomenal variation without representational difference within a modality, the more pressing issue is how to deal with it across modalities. John considers in a footnote the case of seeing and feeling a circular plate. Do the visual and tactile experiences, which intuitively differ a great deal in phenomenology, represent the same sensible quality -- circularity -- or different modality-specific shape qualities? John argues that given that the two experiences are alike in representing circularity, we should accept that the two experiences share a qualitative character associated with the experience of circularity. If the qualitative character associated with the representation of circularity differed between sight and touch, in virtue of what would it differ? The problem is that the only plausible candidate would be that the qualitative character isn't the sensible quality of circularity, but instead is identical with the "specifying property" ( $\Phi_v$  or  $\Phi_t$ ) that an experience must have in order to be a visual or tactile experience. As John points out, "The problem with this is that both  $\Phi_v$  and  $\Phi_t$  are experiential properties. Identifying them with qualitative characters would be to

treat SEE and TOUCH as having constituting properties, properties that constitute, rather than merely facilitate perceptual awareness of, the qualitative aspect of phenomenal consciousness" (12). The phenomenological difference in the respective circularity experiences is merely apparent, or, rather, it is due to the many other differences in the experiences beyond the qualitative character associated with the experiential representation of circularity.

But notice where this leads. The label, "modality-impure" representationalism does little work. That is, the specification of the *modality* in which representation occurs is not what's solving the problem with pure representationalism, that is, the problem of saying how some red-representing mental states are red-feeling ones and others are not. Rather, it is the *mode of intentionality*, as we might call it, that does the work. Phenomenal differences across modalities are explained exhaustively by representational differences, but what explains the difference between the occurrent thought that there is a red thing in front of me and the perceptual experience of a red thing in front of me, e.g., is that the latter constitutes a mode of *awareness* of redness. It's not that it's a specifically *visual* sensory mode of awareness of that quality, but that it is, simply, a mode of intentionality that fosters *awareness* of the qualitative property itself. So, John seems really to be an intermodal representationalist who solves the problem of pure representationalism by being a *mode-of-intentionality-impure* (MOI-impure) representationalist.

#### *4. Pure, MOI-impure and MOP-impure representationalism*

The MOI-impure theorist faces a difficult question. Given that one cannot invoke the specifying property -- the property a mental state must have in order to be a visual (or a tactile) experience - - to explain the qualitative difference between seeing and feeling circularity, what accounts for the qualitative difference between representing a color perceptually and in occurrent thought?

What makes thinking that p differ in phenomenal properties from perceiving that p? If it is just the richness of what's represented, we are back to pure representationalism. Is it functional facts about the role of the mental state? Such accounts nicely explain the differences among various non-qualitative propositional attitudes, such as belief and desire, but are strained to explain what affords awareness. Given that both thought and perception are ways of being intentionally related to redness, how -- apart from invoking specifying properties -- is the qualitative difference between such states to be explained?

The problem is that the relevant bit of Russellian content is identical in occurrently thinking that there is a red thing before me and in seeing that there is a red thing before me. The MOI-impure theorist must accept either: (i) thinking involves representing a different property altogether, since it lacks qualitative aspects; (ii) specifying properties constitute qualitative aspects of intentional states; (iii) functional facts exhaustively explain the difference in phenomenology between states with identical representational contents; (iv) thinking is a deficient kind of intentional relation to a property -- thinking leaves out the essential qualitative nature of the property. Each option is unattractive: (i) is implausible on views according to which perception grounds belief; (ii) is a diluted representationalism; (iii) might tell us what grounds awareness, but why should awareness, just in virtue of its causal role, differ in such a phenomenologically drastic way from other sorts of intentional relations to qualities; (iv) threatens to collapse into (i).

The MOP-impure representationalist avoids such worries. The felt circularity is perceived under a tactile mode of presentation, and the seen circularity is perceived under a visual mode of presentation. Both are represented under perceptual modes of presentation, and thought represents redness under a cognitive mode of presentation or way of thinking about.

## 5. Revelation

John's argument on behalf of the MOD-theorist against physicalism and dispositionalism goes like this: (1) Tomato looks to be red; (2) Red=physical property P; (3) So, Tomato looks to be P. Since (3) is false -- the tomato does not look to have a determinate SSR or to be a disposition, physicalism and dispositionalism are incompatible with MOD-impure representationalism about phenomenal properties.

Again, the Fregean wouldn't be worried about similar arguments because the Fregean has a story about failure of substitution in attitude reports. The Russellian, in particular, must explain why statements like (3) are true even though subjects reject them as descriptions of how things look to be.<sup>3</sup> But, of course, Russellians have strategies to deal with inconvenient reports from semantically uninitiated subjects. Such stories, however, standardly (in the case of belief reports) appeal to such things as *ways of believing* or *states of belief* that explain how things seem from the subject's point of view.<sup>4</sup> However, because we are considering an account of phenomenal properties -- *how things appear from the subject's point of view* -- the failure of substitutivity here spells even bigger trouble for the Russellian representationalist about phenomenal properties. It is even less plausible here than in the case of belief that a subject would deny (3) if it were true, since (3) aims precisely to capture how things are from the subject's vantage point.

Suppose we accept that (3) is not a report subjects accept as capturing how things seem from their perceptual standpoint. Does this by itself justify the rejection of physicalism and acceptance of primitivism by the MOD-theorist? To conclude that the color represented is not a physical property, but instead is a primitive one, requires the further assumption that what is

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<sup>3</sup> Or to explain why Russellianism does not imply the truth of attitude reports like (3).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Perry, Crimmins and Perry, Richard.

phenomenologically apparent to one is the very nature of the property, and that there is nothing about the nature of the property that goes beyond what is introspectively accessible. Short of accepting that color experience reveals in a way accessible to the subject the nature of color properties, colors might in fact be physical properties. Suppose, however, we say that what is revealed is the looks or appearances -- the qualitative faces -- of surfaces with particular physical color properties. We see how colored surfaces (or colors) look -- their appearances -- but do not thereby grasp their very natures. The look need not be the nature. We do, nonetheless, thereby come to know of and about the colors. Representing looks or appearances might be a way of representing a property (just as representing a subset of a thing's properties (that need not include ones that are part of its nature) is a way of representing the thing), and representational properties might still explain phenomenal properties of an experience. The colors retain their qualitative characteristics, but perhaps shed their qualitative natures.

The picture according to which perception provides limited viewpoint on properties (not just objects) is plausible. Why think perception furnishes awareness of the very natures of properties? Imagine a kind of super-natural perceptual experience that presents the full natures of properties and qualities. With such a perceptive faculty, things and features accessibly seem to be  $p$  iff it's in their nature that  $p$ . Ordinary perceptual awareness need not be super-natural perceptual awareness. The fact that perception represents a property with a certain nature may be accessible to a subject only through that property's qualitative face. Unless we accept that perceptual experience represents the colors just as they are, in all of their chromatic glory, then room exists for physicalism or dispositionalism about the colors, even for MOD-impure representationalists. And even MOD-impure representationalists about phenomenal properties have reason to resist Revelation.