

Forestalling a food fight over color¹

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Abstract: The disagreement between “color realists” and “color eliminativists” is better seen as a disagreement over pedagogical policies, about how best to satisfy lay curiosity about “what color is,” than as a clash of substantive theories. To suppose otherwise is to endow the ordinary language term “color” with more authority than it can bear.

Byrne & Hilbert (2003; henceforth B&H) provide valuable clarification of the complexities – undreamt of by the layman – that make it hard to answer the question of what color is, and that often lead color scientists to say such remarkable and extravagant things. They emphasize at the outset that their issue is not just how to define the ordinary language term “color”: *“The problem of color realism is like the investigation of what humans can digest, not the investigation of the folk category of food.”* (target article, sect. 1.1, para. 4), but then I am puzzled by a tension in the target article regarding the weight the authors put on our ordinary intuitions about color. The very setting of the issue as a disagreement between “color realists” and “color eliminativists” endows the everyday concept with somewhat more authority than it deserves – comparable to an imaginary debate between biologists who were “food realists” and “food eliminativists”!

On the one hand, the authors have no problem with gathering together types of reflectances that “will seem a motley jumble” (sect. 3.1.1) and they find the proposal that there are different types of colors (surface colors, volume colors, source colors) “quite unacceptable” because these different kinds of objects “*can look the same* in respect of color” (sect. 3.1.2, emphasis mine) – which they take as trumping all other considerations. They go on: “Therefore, the natural inference is that there is a *single* property that vision represents all these objects as having” (sect. 3.1.2, emphasis mine). They insist, then, on “a single property” because common intuition demands it, but that property can nevertheless be a motley jumble of types of reflectances. Are disjunctive properties good, real properties? My own metaphysical intuitions are not finely enough tuned to permit me to adjudicate the soundness of this proposal, but I don’t think the issue needs to arise.

Like many philosophical projects, the target article is an exercise in definition. Is there a way to escape the dread counterexamples by adroitly adjusting the definition to meet all cases? Maybe there’s always a bullet-proof definition at the end of such a quest, but only a few hardy philosophers will persist long enough to tolerate its multiple clauses. It seems to me that a better question, a more scientifically useful one, is somewhat less ambitious, more relaxed: Is there a way of defining the property of color so that it is

1. scientifically sound
2. largely consonant with everyday usage, our starting point
3. compact enough to be wieldable, teachable, explicable, usable?

There really is a use for such a definition if it can be found: as a curiosity-satisfier. It would solve what might be only pedagogical or public-relations problems, but these can be severe. We start out wondering about colors, using the everyday word as we find it, and using our everyday experience as anchor. What, we wonder, can science tell us *about all that*? A good workaday definition of color that people could agree on could be used to *answer* the naive question “What, if anything, is color?” in a way that is scientifically defensible, informative, and readily shown to be a satisfier of *that* innocent and admirable curiosity, not just the answer to some wildly different substitute question. And if it turns out that no definition of color can meet these contingently imposed requirements, then we can explain why the ordinary “folk category” of color doesn’t happen to pick out anything real, and be “realists” about whatever we put in its stead. (There is no need for biologists to form realist and anti-realist camps about what is digestible, after all.)

B&H show that various color scientists are not “color realists” by finding telling quotations which invite or demand that interpretation. I wonder if these scientists would be better described as just a little too impatient with this pedagogical task, willing to strike a compromise bargain, oversimplifying or exaggerating in order to fend off the most serious and ubiquitous confusions about color. In other words, I suspect that these killer quotations should be viewed as less than successful stabs at public education, not expressions of considered “theories” of the ontological status of colors. But perhaps I am overusing the principle of charity.

Vision involving spectral differences (not just luminance differences) turns out to be wonderfully strange, and I think there has been enough astute canvassing of the prospects so that we can be pretty sure that *any* theory “of color” will have some counterintuitive bite-the-bullet implications in one corner or another; but I am surprised at one particular bullet B&H decide to bite: unknowable color facts about, for instance, which chip is (really) unique green. For this to be a fact, there has to be some standard of correctness which isn’t just majority rule or something like it. But it isn’t just that we don’t yet know any such standard; we have good reason to believe that there couldn’t be one, any more than there could be an unknowable fact about the *correct* pronunciation of the word “controversy” (who really has it right, the Brits or the Americans?). B&H have a clear understanding, it seems, of the coevolutionary coordination of color vision and reflectance

properties, and it would seem to *follow from this* that the “ideal” of a unique green independent of (human) physiology is as indefinable as the ideal of a correct pronunciation of a word independent of human social practices. Color isn’t like distance or horizontality, for the simple reason that distance and horizontality properties didn’t co-evolve with spatial vision. Yes, people can make mistakes about unique green, and about how “controversy” is pronounced, but that doesn’t mean that there is a people-independent way of fixing what is right in these cases.

NOTE

1. The Editor apologizes to the author for mislaying this commentary (submitted June 27, 2002) and thanks him for taking the trouble to resubmit it for continuing commentary.