Color Relationalism*

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It is when I struggle to be brief that I become obscure.
— Horace, Ars Poetica, I. 25.

1 What is it?: Exposition

Color relationalism is the view that colors are constituted in terms of relations to perceiving subjects and perceptual circumstances.

It may be useful to compare this proposal about color against less controversial relationalist views about other properties. Relationalism about being a teacher is the (plausible) view that things bear the latter property not by virtue of their intrinsic makeups, but by standing in the right (viz., pedagogical) sort of relation to relata (viz., students).¹ Or, again, relationalism about being humorous is the (plausible) view that things bear the latter property not in virtue of their intrinsic makeups, but by standing in the right sort of relation (viz., the relation of bringing about in the relata certain kinds of amusement reactions) to relata (viz., appropriately equipped sentient beings). So, too, relationalism about color is the view that things bear the latter not by virtue of their intrinsic makeups, but by standing in the right sort of relations to (the right sorts of) perceivers and (the right sorts of) perceptual circumstances.²

So exactly what, for a relationalist, counts as the right — i.e., color constitutive — sorts of relations, perceivers, and circumstances? Because there is a wide range of answers to these questions, about which reasonable relationalists will disagree, it is probably best to think of relationalism as a view family, rather than a single specific view. Perhaps the most historically important form of color relationalism, sometimes associated (controversially) with great moderns including Galileo, Boyle, Newton, and

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¹Here I pass over all sorts of complications about the metaphysics of intrinsicness; see, e.g., Weatherson and Marshall (2014).
²One could, of course, consider a more general form of relationalism requiring that colors are constituted in terms of relations, but not that they are constituted in terms of relations to perceivers and circumstances, in particular. I’m formulating relationalism in the more restrictive way so as to make the relationalist/non-relationalist distinction coincide with the most important and historically salient divisions in philosophical space. (On the more general construal, the view that colors are (classes of) surface spectral distributions — which are ways of affecting light — would be no less relationalist than the classical dispositionalist view that colors are (roughly) dispositions to cause certain sensations in normal perceivers in normal circumstances; a taxonomy that lumps these positions together seems like not the most useful way of carving the space of options.)
Locke, holds that the relevant relations are dispositions to cause color sensations, and
the relata are normal perceivers in normal circumstances. Contemporary defenders of
related views include McGinn (1983); Peacocke (1984) and Johnston (1992). Moreover,
a number of philosophers, including Cohen (2003, 2009); Matthen (2005); Thompson
(1995); Thompson et al. (1992), have more recently defended a range of non-traditional
forms of color relationalism that differ from dispositionism (and from one another)
largely in just how they understand the color-constitutive relation. For present
purposes, however, it will be useful to think of relationalism broadly, as there is much
that can be said about the strengths and weaknesses of the general view — i.e., the
claim that colors are constituted in terms of relations to perceivers and circumstances
— independently of the more particular commitments that divide relationalists.

2 Why believe it?: Motivation

The leading motivation for color relationalism, both in its historical and contemporary
forms, is a non-deductive argument form concerning perceptual variation. Though this
argument form generalizes over a very wide set of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and
interspecies phenomena, it is best appreciated, at least initially, in its application to
single cases.

Thus, we can begin with a case of intrapersonal variation that involves our
perceptual reactions to the central strips in the left and right halves of figure 1. The strips

![Figure 1: The two center strips are qualitatively identical, but visual systems react differently to them as a function of the backgrounds against which they are set.](image)

3For discussion and comparison, see Cohen (2009, ch. 8).
in the two halves of the figure are intrinsically (qualitatively) identical. (Indeed, with scissors and glue, we could generate the same effect with a single strip rather than two qualitatively identical copies.) But if you are like most normally sighted subjects, your visual system will react differently to the strip depending on the background against which it is set: it will look lighter and more greenish against the yellowish background on the left, and darker and more yellowish against the greenish background on the right. There is, then, variation in your perceptual reaction to the one stimulus (the strip) as a function of the circumstances in which you perceive it.

Now, on standard (though not universally held) assumptions, each of your variant perceptual reactions is a representation of the strip and its properties — each represents the way the distal object is. If so, then we can ask: which of the variant reactions is a veridical representation of the way the distal object is, and why? Note that this question is here intended metaphysically, not epistemically: we are asking not ‘how do we know which is veridical?’ but ‘which of the variant perceptual effects really is veridical, and what makes that the case?’ The logically possible answers (in a case with two variants) are: (i) neither veridical, (ii) one veridical at the expense of the other, (iii) both veridical.

Which of the logically possible answers should we select? The neither veridical option is coherent, but unduly skeptical: the case can be elaborated so as to make it as conducive to veridical visual apprehension of the world as we like without thereby eliminating the possibility of perceptual variation, so choosing this answer is uncomfortably close to holding that no one ever perceives any color veridically. The one right option is also coherent, but objectionably stipulative given the symmetry between variants: every physical or psychological fact that can be cited in a description of either variant can be met by a corresponding physical or psychological fact that can be cited in a description of the other, and there’s no obvious reason why the facts cited in one of these descriptions (and not others) should make it count as veridical (to the exclusion of others). Hence, it’s hard to imagine what could count as a non-stipulative, non-question-begging reason for counting one variant as uniquely veridical. This leaves the ecumenicist answer, on which both variants are veridical; this answer has the advantage over other answers that it avoids forms of undue skepticism and unmotivated stipulation that, I take it, we should want to avoid.

But accepting this kind of ecumenicism is a short inference to the best explanation away from color relationalism. Relationalism explains how it could be, in a situation...
where a given stimulus $a$ brings about different perceptual effects in perceiver $S$ in circumstance $C_1$ and in $S$ in circumstance $C_2$ — i.e., $a$ looks red to $S$ in $C_1$ and does not look red to $S$ in $C_2$ — that both perceptual effects can veridically represent $a$. The crucial observation here is that if an object bears relation $R$ to a sequence of relata $⟨r_1, r_2, \ldots⟩$, that says nothing at all about whether it does or does not bear $R$ to some other sequence of relata $⟨r'_1, r'_2, \ldots⟩$, or whether it does or does not bear some different relation $R'$ to either one of those sequences of relata. Thus, if Aristotle is the teacher of Alexander, this neither requires nor precludes that Aristotle is the teacher of Cleopatra. (Nor, indeed, does it require or preclude that Aristotle bears some other relation to either Alexander or Cleopatra). So, too, if color relationalism is true, and $a$ is red to $S$ in $C_1$, this neither requires nor precludes that $a$ is red to $S$ in $C_2$. Consequently, relationalists can hold both that (i) $a$’s effect on $S$ in $C_1$ is a veridical representation because $a$ is red to $S$ in $C_1$, and (ii) $a$’s effect on $S$ in $C_2$ is a veridical representation because $a$ is not red to $S$ in $C_2$.

In short, then, the facts about perceptual variation motivate color relationalism via a pair of non-deductive inferences — the first from the empirical data (plus standard canons of rationality) to ecumenicism, and the second from ecumenicism to relationalism.

As indicated above, this argumentative pattern generalizes widely, and can be applied, in a consistent way, to interspecies, intrapersonal, and interpersonal instances of perceptual variation.

**Interspecies:** Perceivers of different species differ considerably in their color vision: the chromatic effects that a single stimulus has on these perceivers vary widely as a function of many parameters of their visual systems — retinal cone type populations (and population ratios), cone tuning curves, macular and lens pigmentation, and on and on. While there may be principled grounds for saying that some such variants represent the stimulus color erroneously, there remains significant variation between variants in organisms that pass standard comparative psychophysical criteria for normal color vision; as such, it would be objectionably *ad hoc* to treat these variants as systematically misrepresenting the colors of objects. The relationalist holds that all of these variants are veridical, thereby avoiding undue skepticism and *ad hoc* stipulation, by holding that the stimulus exemplifies (simultaneously, all over) one color with respect to perceivers of kind $K_1$, another color with respect to perceivers of kind $K_2$, and so on.

**Interpersonal:** Human perceivers differ considerably in their color vision: the chromatic effects of a single stimulus on these viewers vary widely as a function of many parameters of their visual systems — retinal cone populations (and population ratios), cone tuning curves, macular and lens pigmentation, and on and on. While there may be principled grounds for saying that some such variants represent the stimulus color erroneously, there remains significant interpersonal variation among perceivers who pass standard tests for normal color vision; as such, it would be objectionably *ad hoc* to treat these variants as systematically misrepresenting the colors of objects. The relationalist can hold that all of these variants are veridical, thereby avoiding undue skepticism and *ad hoc* stipulation, by holding that the stimulus exemplifies (simultaneously, all over) one color with respect to perceiver $S_1$, another color with respect to perceiver $S_2$, and so on.

ecumenically, since here the perceivers access the very same ranges of non-relational colors. For discussion, see Pautz (2006, 2008) and Cohen (2009, pp. 78–88).
Intrapersonal: The chromatic effects of a single stimulus on a single perceiver vary widely as a function of many parameters of the viewing circumstance — surround, lighting, viewing angle, viewing distance, state of adaptation of the perceiver, and on and on. While there may be principled grounds for saying that some such variants represent the stimulus color erroneously, there remains significant perceptual variation within ecologically normal circumstances; as such, it would be objectionably ad hoc to treat these variants as systematically misrepresenting the colors of objects. The relationalist holds that all of these variants are veridical, thereby avoiding both undue skepticism and ad hoc stipulation, by holding that the stimulus exemplifies (simultaneously, all over) one color with respect to circumstance $C_1$, another color with respect to circumstance $C_2$, and so on.

Combining these considerations, and ignoring many niceties (also assuming that each perceiver falls in exactly one relevant perceiver type), leads to the relationalist proposal that colors are constituted in terms of relations to both perceivers and perceptual circumstances — that colors are not monadic properties like red or green, but rather relational properties like red for $S_1$ in $C_1$ or green for $S_2$ in $C_2$.

3 No, really?: Objections

3.1 Color representation

It will not have escaped notice that there is a mismatch between the relationalist’s colors and the form of ordinary linguistic (and, plausibly, mental) representation of color. Ordinary color attributions typically don’t contain overt specifications of the perceiver and circumstance parameters — and certainly not overt specifications of perceivers or circumstances that are as fine-grained as apparently needed to cope with the observed range of perceptual variation per the relationalist strategy above. So it’s not clear how ordinary predications could genuinely (non-gappily) have relationalist’s colors as semantic values.

But this problem can be solved by two independently plausible ideas. The first is that ordinary color predicates pick out “coarse-grained colors” — relational properties analogous to the fine-grained colors discussed above, but whose parametric positions are filled by relatively coarse-grained specifications of perceivers and perceptual conditions. This idea allows that the contents expressed by ordinary uses of color predicates need not attain the high levels of determinacy of the fine-grained colors; it simultaneously allows that the contents expressed by ordinary uses of color predicates can be multiply instantiated. The second independently plausible idea needed is a version of semantic contextualism for color language and thought — roughly, that contextual enrichment adds to the information overtly encoded in ordinary color attributions. Combining these two ideas results in the view that the predicate ‘is red’, as uttered/thought in context $K$, expresses the property red for the perceivers relevant in
context $K$ under the perceptual circumstances relevant in context $K$.\(^7\) (Similarly for other color predicates.)\(^8\)

### 3.2 Disagreement

One might worry that the relationalist’s implementation of ecumenicism, which involves the idea that different variants ascribe properties relativized to different parameters, deprives distinct ascriptions of a common subject matter, and so precludes intrapersonal and interpersonal disagreement about color.\(^9\)

But this worry can be answered by appeal to the relationalist’s coarse-grained colors. Even if the distinct fine-grained colors unique yellow for $S_1$ in $C_1$, greenish-yellow for $S_2$ in $C_2$ attributed by $S_1$’s and $S_2$’s visual systems are compatible, we can account for the disagreement between $S_1$ and $S_2$ by claiming that $S_1$ verbally/cognitively attributes, while $S_2$ verbally/cognitively forebears, a common coarse-grained color (viz., one whose perceiver/circumstance parameters are assigned to the very same values). It would seem, then, that relationalism has the capacity to describe individuals as disagreeing about the colors of objects — it is just that the descriptions in question will involve representations of coarse-grained properties at the cognitive/linguistic level rather than representations of the fine-grained properties by the visual system.\(^10\)

\(^7\)Analogy: Ordinary motion attributions don’t contain overt specifications of reference frames, so it’s not clear how ordinary predications could genuinely have properties constituted in terms of relations to reference frames as their semantic values. But we can reconcile these predications with a relativistic ontology of motion properties by construing the former as making tacit reference to a contextually salient reference frame, holding that ‘is moving at 60 miles per hour’, as uttered/thought in context $K$, expresses the property moving at 60 miles per hour relative to the reference frame relevant in context $K$.

\(^8\)Two points about coarse-grained colors are worth noting. First, as defined, they are no less relational than fine-grained colors, so fit smoothly into a thoroughly relationalist ontological inventory. Second, though they are designed to serve our conversational/explanatory needs by being relativized to contextually relevant types of perceivers and circumstances, such choices are not therefore metaphysically principled: it would be absurd to attempt to break the symmetry in cases of perceptual variation by holding that the variant arising in perceivers/circumstances contextually relevant to us is distinguished from others in any metaphysically significant way. (Analogy: we might be speaking in a context in which having fewer than 100 hairs on one’s head makes one count as bald; but it would absurd to treat this contextual standard as a metaphysically principled distinction between the positive and negative extension of ‘bald’.) So the acceptance of coarse-grained colors is not at odds with relationalist’s claim (crucial to her argument from perceptual variation) that perceptual variants are metaphysically symmetric.

\(^9\)What I say here and below applies to both agreement and disagreement.


Response: Evidence of agreement and disagreement in color representation (e.g., matching judgments, verbal attributions) involves contributions from cognitive/linguistic as well as perceptual levels of representation. Hence it shouldn’t be taken for granted that we must seek explanations of the phenomena in terms of perceptual representations. (Analogy: It’s reasonable to demand that an adequate overall account of language understanding should predict the unacceptability of strings like those in (1).

\[(1)\]

a. Le silence vertébral indispose la voile licite. (Tesnière 1959, ch 20)

The vertebral silence indisposes the licit sail.

3.3 Error

It is also possible to worry that the relationalist’s embrace of ecumenicism — designed, as it is, to make veridical many different representations of color — leaves her without a way of saying that any variant color representation is erroneous, and so without an account of color misrepresentation. But this worry is misplaced: relationalism makes room for several forms of color misrepresentation.

A first involves hallucination. If, in hallucinatory experience, I perceptually represent an elephant exemplifying pink (for myself in the circumstances I am in) even though there is no local elephant, I am thereby entertaining a perceptual representation that misascribes a color to an individual. Admittedly, here blame for the representation’s non-veridicality lies, in the first instance, with the absence of an individual answering to the subject term, and not with some more limited problem about the color property it attributes — that’s what makes the case an instance of hallucination rather than illusion. Notwithstanding this point, it seems fair to describe the case as one in which the perceiver perceptually entertains a non-veridical color representation, viz., a color misrepresentation. And there’s no reason a relationalist cannot recognize color misrepresentations of this kind.

A second relationalist-friendly form of color misrepresentation involves deviant causal chains. Thus, to return to a fanciful example from Cohen (2007), if a telekinetic tomato stimulates my visual cortex without affecting my retina, and my subsequently attending to that tomato causes in me the reaction I normally get when looking at ordinary, non-telekinetic, ripe tomatoes, then my perceptual representation of its color is obtained through a deviant causal chain. But if that’s so, then even a committed ecumenicist about perceptual variation is within her rights to say that this color representation should be excluded rather than treated as veridical. The point generalizes: while accepting ecumenicism about perceptual variation means treating as veridical whatever color ascriptions can’t be set aside for principled and non-question-begging reasons, this is compatible with thinking that there are some variants that can be set aside for reasons independent of our commitments about color. There’s surely room for disagreement about what counts as deviant, but it’s plausible that cases involving telekinetic tomatoes and blunt instrument head trauma fall into this class on anyone’s story, and therefore that relationalists can describe the color representations arising in such cases as erroneous, notwithstanding their general ecumenicist sympathies.

A third way in which relationalism makes room for erroneous color representation involves errors in the representation of the coarse-grained colors described above. Suppose you encounter a when it is illuminated in an unusual way you are not aware of — say, in the psychophysics lab, or, as happens frequently around my university, in parking lots with low pressure sodium vapor lamps, and that you (veridically) perceptually represent a as exemplifying the fine-grained color gray for you in the circumstance you are in. You have no reason to believe that there is anything odd about the spectral composition of the illumination, and so hold rational but false beliefs about what sorts of perceiver you are / what sort of perceptual circumstance you are in. Thus, the perceiver and circumstance types relevant in your context K are the ordinary ones you take yourself to exemplify and occupy, rather than the unusual ones you in fact exemplify and occupy. Consequently, you infer/compute, in the ordinary way, from
your veridical perceptual representation that a bears the fine-grained color gray for you 
in the circumstance you are in to the erroneous conclusion that a bears the coarse-grained 
color gray for the perceivers relevant in context K under the perceptual circumstances relevant 
in K. In so doing, you misrepresent a’s color.11

3.4 Color Constancy

As we have seen, color relationalism takes differences in color perception very seriously, 
and indeed (to a first approximation) treats differences in color perception as strong 
evidence of differences in color properties. But one might object that this treatment 
ignores a kind of color stability that comes out in garden-variety instances of color 
constancy, such as that depicted in figure 2, where a materially uniform coffee cup 
is partially illuminated by direct sunlight and partially shaded (there is a luminance 
edge on its facing surface). Though there’s much that is puzzling and controversial 
about such cases, it surely seems natural to say that there’s some good sense in which 
patches of the cup on opposite sides of the luminance edge are alike in color. Of course, 
relationalists will want to say that there is perceptual variation, hence a color difference, 
across the luminance edge: the patch on one side looks and is lighter white to perceiver 
S₁ in its condition involving direct sunlight illumination, while the patch on the other 
side looks and is darker white to perceiver S₁ in its condition involving indirect 
illumination. Are relationalists, therefore, unable to account for the phenomenon of 
color constancy?

They are not. Recall that, for relationalists, objects (including surface patches) 
simultaneously exemplify multiple colors. In particular, relationalists will say that a 
patch of the coffee cup exemplifies not only the color that it is occurrently manifesting 
to S₁ in C₁, but also colors that it is not occurrently manifesting. Thus, the relationalist

11Objection: This third route to error locates the error at cognitive/linguistic levels, so doesn’t 
make room for specifically perceptual color misrepresentations.

Response: As noted, relationalists have other resources for describing perceptual misrepresen-
tations of color, in case that is wanted. Moreover, and once again, while I agree we should want an 
account of color that makes room for misrepresentation, I also think it should be potentially up for 
grabs just what kind of theoretical descriptions of misrepresentation we offer (cf. note 10).
can hold that the occurrently darker patch of the cup now in \( C_1 \) exemplifies the non-manifest color brighter white to \( S_1 \) in \( C_2 \). Of course, she will say that that is the very color the lighter patch of the cup both exemplifies and occurrently manifests. Therefore, she can acknowledge a color property that is constant/shared between the two patches, even though (she will say) it is a color that only one of them occurrently manifests.\(^{12}\) And she can describe mechanisms of color constancy as delivering verdicts about whether patches occurrently manifesting different colors would match visually if, counterfactually, the two were presented under the conditions that one of them is occurrently in.\(^{13}\)

### 3.5 Phenomenology

For many, phenomenology is relationalism’s “Achilles’ heel” (Maund 2010) — a source of evidence that runs directly counter to the view. Many have held that, with notable exceptions such as the colors of holograms and glossy or shimmering materials (e.g., the backs of CDs), colors just do not look the way that relationalism says they are. Here is one especially direct expression of this idea:\(^{14}\)

...when we see an object as red we see it as having a simple, monadic, local property of the object’s surface. The color is perceived as intrinsic to the object, in much the way that shape and size are perceived as intrinsic. No relation to perceivers enters into how the color appears; the color is perceived as wholly on the object, not as somehow straddling the gap.

\(^{12}\)Objection:

...if ... the perceptually distinguishable regions ... manifest different colors, then, on Cohen’s account of color, they actually look different colors. According to Cohen, then, there isn’t color constancy (in the relevant sense). This seems wrong to me and to miss the point. I take color constancy for the purposes of this objection to be constancy in how things look color-wise through different lighting conditions. It isn’t constancy, period. Cohen fixes up something that gets the latter but he doesn’t get the former (Tye 2012, p. 303).

Response: Why assume that an adequate description of color constancy must allow that what is shared is manifested color? That is a theoretical assumption that goes far beyond the matching data that motivates taking there to be a shared/constant property, and that the relationalist description of constancy clearly respects. Relationalism may not respect the theoretical description of the phenomenon that Tye prefers; but he owes us an argument for thinking that’s a shortcoming of the view. (I’d add that relationalists can also allow that the two regions share any number of occurrently manifested properties that are not colors; hence even if, counterfactually, we had a reason to believe that what is shared in the cases under dispute must include an occurrently manifest property, this still wouldn’t threaten the relationalist’s characterization of them. For further discussion of these and related issues, see Cohen (2012); Gert (2012).)

\(^{13}\)The counterfactual condition at issue is neither (i) that they would match if presented under some or other condition (that is too weak), nor (ii) that they would match if presented under every condition (that is too strong). It is that they would match if presented under the very condition that one of them is occurrently presented in.


A further phenomenological objection to relationalism, which I leave unaddressed here for reasons of space, contends that relationalism cannot be combined coherently with a plausible metaphysics of conscious experience (Boghossian and Velleman 1989; McGinn 1996; Sellars 1956; Stroud 2000). For further discussion and response, see Cohen (2009, pp. 163–174).
between it and the perceiver. Being seen as red is not like being seen as larger than or to the left of. The “color envelope” that delimits an object stops at the object’s spatial boundaries. So if color were inherently relational, … then perception of color would misrepresent its structure — we would be under the illusion that a relational property is nonrelational. Contrapositing, given that perception is generally veridical as to color, colors are not relational (McGinn 1996, pp. 541–542).

This objection is initially puzzling, since it is not immediately obvious whether and how phenomenology might provide evidence about the relationality or nonrelationality (or any other aspect of the metaphysics) of the properties with whose instances we have perceptual experience. Indeed, the idea that phenomenology is potentially informative about the metaphysics of, say, being water or being a tiger is somewhat surprising. Why, then, does the proponent of the objection we are considering believe that phenomenology bears on the metaphysics of color in particular?

A clue comes from consideration of the notable exceptions mentioned earlier — the colors of holograms and the backs of CDs, which, according to the critics, do look relational. The distinguishing feature of such objects is that the color phenomenology they generate is (intrapersonally) unusually fragile: even very slight and involuntary changes in viewing angle of a sort that are almost impossible to avoid in ordinary circumstances alter the resulting color phenomenology dramatically. So it would seem that proponents of the phenomenological objection against relationalism are treating the colors of these (according to them, exceptional) objects as looking relational on the grounds that we all have (indeed, cannot avoid having when visually attending to them) evidence of intrapersonal variation in the phenomenology they occasion. Whereas, in contrast, says the objector, we lack analogous evidence of intrapersonal phenomenal variation when visually attending to the steady colors of ordinary matte objects.

The explanation just contemplated has in its favor both that it begins to make sense of how phenomenology might bear on the relationality of colors, and that it initially seems to distinguish the exceptions from the non-exceptions in the way intended.

But on second thought, the latter distinction appears not to survive scrutiny. For if evidence of phenomenal variation counts as support for the relationality of unsteady/shimmering colors, then, presumably, phenomenal variation, if it exists, should likewise count in favor of the relationality of the steady colors of matte objects. And there is phenomenal variation — both intrapersonally and interpersonally — with respect to the steady colors of matte objects: as we saw in §2, color phenomenology varies dramatically along a large number of parameters of the perceiver and the viewing condition (including, inter alia, the viewing angle parameter cited in support of the relationality of the unsteady colors).

If there is a difference between the forms of phenomenal variation accepted as evidence of relationality by the critics (viz., intrapersonal variation as a function of viewing angle for unsteady colors) and the rest, it appears to be a difference only in obviousness. Intrapersonal phenomenal variation across changes in viewing angle is

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15I ask this question not because I myself deny that phenomenology does bear on the metaphysics of color (after all, I made extensive appeal to color phenomenology in motivating color relationalism in §2). Rather, I pose the question because I hope to show that, once we have a clear view of how the objector proposes to argue from phenomenological evidence to a metaphysics of color, we will be in a position to see that the phenomenological evidence tilts in favor of color relationalism rather than against it.
hard not to observe with unsteady colors, while it takes somewhat more effort (how much varies between cases) to catalog the intrapersonal variation present with steady colors. Interpersonal phenomenal variation is ordinarily even less obvious to single observers without access to proper psychophysics labs, though, as we have seen, no less real. In short, once we accept that phenomenal variation gives a way of understanding how phenomenology can speak to questions about relationality at all, we have reason for treating the wide range of evidence of interpersonal and intrapersonal phenomenal variation with respect to color perception, whether obvious or not, as evidence of the relationality of colors.

Why, then, have so many thought that phenomenology is at odds with a relationalist metaphysics for steady colors? Plausibly, this is because the very fragility of intrapersonal phenomenology for unsteady colors hides the fact, emphasized by Levin (2000, p. 157), that intrapersonal phenomenology bears on questions about relationality only when we engage in comparisons between multiple phenomenal episodes, together with reflective ratiocination on those comparisons — and not just the application of introspection to individual, punctate phenomenal glances. Unsteady colors, by their very unsteadiness, make phenomenal comparison so automatic that it is easy to lose sight of the need for comparison and ratiocination, and to believe falsely that relationality must reveal itself in the non-comparative, unreflective phenomenology of punctate glances. Critics are correct to observe that non-comparative, unreflective phenomenology does not reveal the relationality of steady colors. The mistake, fostered by the false belief at issue, is to treat this absence of evidence as evidence of absence.16

In sum, it appears that phenomenology is not the decisive obstacle to relationalism that many have supposed it to be. So long as we remain careful to use phenomenology in a way that allows it to speak to the question of relationality, it turns out that phenomenological evidence supports, rather than detracts from, the case for color relationalism.

4 Conclusion

Color relationalism merits philosophical interest not only because of its continuity with historically important positions, but because it attempts to respect and to reconcile the deliverances of two of our most important pictures of the world: that supplied by our best broadly scientific theories, and that supplied by our manifest experience. Moreover, as I have argued, several of the most pressing objections against the view can be answered. There is, of course, much more to be said about color relationalism, about the many different more specific forms it can take, and about their respective

16 This mistake appears to underlie the quotation above from McGinn (1996), as well as this oft-quoted passage:

If colours looked like dispositions, however, then they would seem to come on when illuminated, just as a lamp comes on when its switch is flipped. Turning on the light would seem, simultaneously, like turning on the colours; or perhaps it would seem like waking up the colours, just as it is seen to startle the cat. Conversely, when the light was extinguished, the colours would not look as if they were being concealed or shrouded in the ensuing darkness: rather, they would look as if they were becoming dormant, like the cat returning to sleep. But colours do not look like that; or not, at least, to us (Boghossian and Velleman 1989, p. 85).
virtues and vices. However, I hope to have made the case that relationalism is a view, or family of views, worth taking seriously.\footnote{Thanks to Damon Crockett and Eliot Michaelson for helpful discussions of this material, and to the editors of this volume for comments on earlier versions of the chapter.}

References


