

# Objective colours as extrinsic entities

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## Aristotelian colours

Perception, for Aristotle, is a natural phenomenon and as such its occurrence does not require an explanation: it occurs when and because a sense-organ is altered, and thus a potentiality is actualised. For Aristotle, there is no additional story to tell: perception just *is* this alteration of the sense-organ. We may, however, ask about its causes: Perception (*aisthēsis*), an alteration of the perceiver (*De An.*, II.5), is the effect of being affected by an external object, which is actually so as the perceiver (or the respective sense-organ), before being affected by it, is potentially. The things initiating this causal process of affection are the proper sensibles (colours for sight, sounds for audition, flavours for taste, smells for olfaction) and, derivatively, so-called accidental unities (such as Darius-qua-white) involving them. Each sense is a potentiality / capacity / power; its essence is “naturally relative” to its objects, its proper sensibles, which (may) exist before the sense in question exists (*Cat.* 8a6-9), for “perception is hardly of itself – but there must be something else beyond the perception, and this must be prior to the perception; since what brings about change is naturally prior to what is changed, even if they are spoken of in relation to each other” (*Met.* Γ. 5, 1010b35-1011a2). Sight, for example, is thus posterior to its proper sensibles, the colours.

This theory combines two very attractive features: a naturalistic account of the experience we undergo when and because we perceive, and an explanation how perception and its objects may be mutually dependent and ‘correlative’, without making the objects ‘subjective’ or dependent on their being perceived.

Of the nature of (some particular) redness, a proper sensible of sight, we are, I think, given the following picture in Aristotle: it is a form of an external object, which exists prior to and independently of our perceiving it. Because it is capable of setting air, which here is a medium of sight, into motion, it may be received by a sense, i.e. sight, the nature of which is to be receptive to it, i.e. to be potentially red. When the red object is perceived, it shares its form with the eye – the sense (sight) is affected by the essence of the proper sensible, while the sense-organ is affected by becoming of a certain extended magnitude. The sense-organ (eye) and the sense (sight) are “the same, although what it is for them to be such is not the same” (*De An.*, II.12, 424a17): sight is a potentiality of the eye, its function and essence; it is sight that becomes red, i.e. is affected only by the form (of the red object), while the eye, which is affected in a different way, is in relation not just to the form, but also the matter of the red object, the bearer of e.g. the reflectance properties that causally explain why it is red I see.

## Aristotelian realism about colours

Such a conception of colours as the proper sensibles of sight<sup>1</sup> is realist in at least three different, interlocking, ways:

- The form RED is a form of mind-independently existing objects and is the actualisation of a power they have independently of being perceived.
- The actualisation of the form RED does not depend on and is not brought about by perception; RED is actualised by light, the medium of sight, and the way it is actualised is ‘reciprocal’ to the power of light to make things visible, not the power of perceivers to see; RED is essentially visible, but not essentially seen.
- In perception, the perceiver is passive; the change that is perception occurs in the perceiver; the perceived object and its colour do not change in perception: nothing mind-independent is altered when and because perception occurs.

Aristotelian colours are not, however, objective in Burge’s sense. They are ‘constitutively explained’ by what it is to see them; the account of their nature essentially mentions human perception, and human perception is *essentially* veridical:

The constitutive explication takes the direction of the constitution relation to be asymmetric. The standards for being veridical that are parts of the natures of perceptual states are constitutively dependent on attributes in the environment. The attributes in the environment are not constitutively dependent on those veridicality conditions. (Burge 2010: 86)

In contrast to this picture, an Aristotelian view will hold that what is seen and the seeing of it are not just mutually interdependent, but that they stand in a relation of mutual grounding: what is seen is essentially visible and of a nature fully actualised only in normal human perception, while normal human perception is what it is in virtue of its power to fully realise what is there to be seen.

This essential interdependence of colours and normal human sight is compatible, however, with human perception being objective in the sense in which objectivity is *produced* by the visual system itself:

Objectivity is the product of separating what occurs on an individual’s sensory surfaces from the significance of those stimulations for specific attributes and particulars in the broader environment. In this way, perception is the product of objectification. (Burge 2010: 400)

From an Aristotelian perspective, objectification occurs in incidental perception, in the step from the seeing of the white of Darius to the seeing of white Darius, via the seeing of Darius-qua-white.

Even though colours are not response-dependent in the usual, counterfactual way, they are still essentially tied to how they look to us, to objective but relational appearance properties:

The reference-fixing responses in us *a priori* associated with a secondary property are constitutive of the essence of the property; the property is, constitutively, a disposition to actually cause those properties. (García-Carpintero 2007: 23)

The reference-fixing responses in us are appearance-properties, properties had by mind-independent things in virtue of how we see them. Such perspectival appearance properties will not be features of perspective-independent things, but rather of appearances, appearances *of* perspective-independent things, to be sure,

1. Rather than of colours we should speak here of “chromatic profiles”, so as to preserve Aristotle’s claim that they are the proper sensibles of sight: we also see black and white things, transparent things and things that do not have surfaces, such as shadows, holes, holograms and rainbows. I will ignore this complication in the following.

but not things that are themselves independent of perspectives. It is the appearance of the stick half-immersed in water that looks bent-from-here and the same appearance that may look straight-from-here with respect to some other location or observer. It is the change in appearance that is responsible for the fact that once the stick is taken out of the water and seen by both of us in clear air, it may no longer be said to appear bent in any sense. Because appearances are grounded in the things appearing, together with their environment, they are appearances of things – things with which we are in perceptual contact when we perceive the appearances.

There is still a distinction between proper and common sensibles to be drawn, however:

“What puts vision apart from hearing, smell, and taste is that we do not conceive of the visible world as offering us objects of visual awareness and attention distinct from (but coincident with) the concrete objects that we also see.” (Martin 2010: 187), citing O’Shaughnessy (2000: 571–572)

The chromatic profile of a coloured thing (its visual appearance, its look) is more closely tied to it than its taste or its visual shape: the being-the-appearance-of relation here is not causal, but constitutive. Looks are nothing but looks of things, i.e. things looking a certain way. In other terms: for *a* to have a visual look that appears red is both, for the look to be red and for the thing itself to appear red. Two possible sources of error present in the case of taste are thereby eliminated: it is not possible that only its look, but not the thing looking a certain way appears red, and the look itself cannot just appear red but fail to be red.

### Appearances more generally

To speak of “*x* as it appears” or “*x* as represented” is ambiguous in at least three ways:

- process** the processes of appearing and of representing are different – they differ in their direction, and in what they are grounded in: things appear in virtue of how they are, while subjects represent in virtue of how they are and these grounds are different in the case of the representation of mind-independent matters of fact;
- event** the two processes may still coincide, and thus be the same event: every appearing is then also a being represented, and every representing also a being appeared to: it is in virtue of such coincidence that these events make available the same information, and reveal the same aspect of the world;
- result** the one event that is both adequately described as “*x* appears to *y* as *F*” and “*x* is represented as *F* by *y*” may still have two different results, and modify its two relata in two different ways: as a dancing ‘produces’ both a dancer and a dance, an event of representing/appearing produces both an appearance and a representation.

## References

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