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# Imperfect Realism: A New Strategy to Reconcile the Manifest and the Scientific Images of Color

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## Abstract

This paper explores a new strategy to defend realism about color, which I dub "imperfect realism", and also diagnoses a problem with the more widespread "perfectionist" approach to reconcile the manifest and scientific images of the world, a problem that leads to philosophical stalemates between realists and their critics. Imperfect realism construes colors as real, objective properties of physical objects, but without demanding that our experiences of colors should be veridical in the majority of cases: The manifest colors we are acquainted with by experience, *generally speaking*, are real, objective qualities of objects in the environment, that is, these types of qualities are indeed instantiated in the objects in the world; but this is compatible with our *particular* experiences of colors of objects being subject to systematic distortion, as many philosophers and scientists are tempted to think looking at the complex evidence regarding color vision. This possibility, that we perceive the true colors of objects only rarely in particular experiences while colors are nevertheless real properties of objects, is a coherent and promising theoretical option.

Since the time of Galileo and Descartes, colors (or "colors-as-they-seem") and other so-called secondary qualities have been eliminated from the external world as they did not fit into a purely non-qualitative understanding of physical reality. This elimination, however, resulted in a different problem regarding color as an offshoot of the mind-body problem, as the scientific image of the world seemed unfit to accommodate also the subjective counterpart of color construed as qualities of experiences (such as "color sensations", "colors of sense-data", "color qualia", "what-it-is-like-to-see-colors", and the like). In the last decades, this problem has led to attempts at returning to a realist stance about color, finding its clearest expression in Alex Byrne's suggestion (2006) that the mind-body problem in the context of qualia and the like should have really been construed as a "body-body problem", where the problem is to reconcile the manifest image of color with the scientific image of the world, and not to reconcile "color qualia" with the scientific image of the brain. These realist aspirations have led to physical-reductionist accounts of color (e.g. Byrne & Hilbert 2003) that received a great deal of criticism because they either fail to capture all the intricacies of color phenomenology or they start to sound too unintuitive and ad-hoc due to the increasingly complex nature of the properties that these theories identify colors with, in an attempt at accommodating the messy data regarding color perception which, on the first glance, seems to support a simpler, subjectivist or eliminativist account of color.

This stalemate in philosophical debates on color results from the fact that color realists tried to argue not only for the reality of color, but they also wanted to arrive at a type of realist theory which establishes that the majority of our particular color experiences are

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veridical, an epistemic question that should be separate from the question of the reality of color. An unexplored position is imperfect realism, where one can be realist about color while accepting that the majority of our color experiences do not correctly represent the exact colors of objects that we see, which allows for a search for simpler properties as properties that colors are identical to or supervene on, that don't necessarily accommodate all or even most of our color experiences, as we are not anymore required to find a common a posteriori physical property that the majority of our color experiences map onto.

Giving a defense of imperfect realism is twofold: Against eliminativist and subjectivist views, I will motivate color realism by pointing out that it is the only option that makes sense in the face of the problem of figuring out what determines the qualitative content of color experiences. I will argue that it makes much more sense to think that why we experience the color qualities we experience and why we have color experiences at all have something to do with facts about colors in the world rather than with facts about the electrical-chemical states of our nervous system which doesn't seem to have the resources to determine the vast qualitative phenomenology of color and other experienced qualities. The metaphysical problem regarding the qualitative content of experiences becomes much easier if the represented qualities are real features of the world and the content of our experiences is somehow supervenient on this reality (albeit in complex ways that allow for widespread illusion). Against realists of the standard type, I will motivate imperfect realism by pointing at how well-known complications regarding color perception sit better with an imperfect realist view. My aim is not to prove that color experiences are indeed systematically distorted, but to make the realist accept the possibility of this widespread distortion, which greatly reduces the burden on the realist view and makes it more intuitive for those who are not moved by worries related to the epistemology of particular perceptual cases.

## References

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