

Rand, Kant, and the Objectivity of Colour

Roderick T. Long

Gnu's Room Forum on Philosophy and Colour, 22 February 2012

I'll begin by setting out Ayn Rand's theory of colour – what her theory is, and why she holds it – and then I'll explain why I think her theory is both mistaken in its own right and inconsistent with her other views.¹

Rand is a direct realist about sense-perception, holding that such perception is causally but not epistemologically mediated. We do not perceive sense-data and infer external objects as their causes; instead we perceive external objects directly. Moreover, as sense-perception is the foundation of our knowledge, we cannot call its reliability into question, since the very conceptual tools one would have to use to do this are derived from perceptual experience and so presuppose its reliability. Hence perceptual error is not strictly possible, though it is possible to misinterpret perceptual evidence – and phenomena that many would regard as non-veridical perceptions are instead identified by Rand either as correct perceptions misinterpreted (as in the case of optical illusions) or as non-perceptions mistaken for perceptions (as in the case of dreams and hallucinations). Rand denies that hallucinations and veridical perceptions are different species of the same genus; in present-day parlance her position would be called disjunctivist.

I think Rand's right about most of that. But *given* these views, one might expect Rand to regard colours as genuine, mind-independent features of external objects, revealed by rather than dependent on our senses. Instead, however, Rand distinguishes between the *content* of a perception and its *form*; when we perceive an object as, for example, square and red, Rand regards the squareness as an intrinsic feature of the entity being perceived, but the redness, on Rand's view, belongs to the form that our awareness of the object takes, and this perceptual form is determined by the nature of our perceptual organs and their interaction with the environment. Hence the redness is located not in the object but rather in the relation between the perceiver and the object.

The reason for this is that every process must have some definite nature and occur by some definite means; thus it is *inevitable*, on Rand's view, that the way objects appear to us should depend on the nature of our perceptual organs. This we know in virtue of philosophical considerations alone; but it is only via scientific rather than philosophical investigation that we can discover *which* aspects of an object's appearance belong to content and which to form. While Rand thinks we have reason to conclude on empirical grounds that squareness belongs to the former and redness to the latter, she acknowledges that we cannot rule out *a priori* the possibility that squareness might turn out to belong to form rather than content as well.

Two things are surprising about Rand's position here. First, the position Rand takes on the status of colour – as belonging to the form rather than the content of perceptual experience – looks remarkably like Immanuel Kant's position on the status of space and time, a position Rand resolutely denounces. (Indeed, Rand seems committed to saying that space and time might

¹ Apart from a few stray remarks, Rand did not publish her theory of colour, but instead developed it in private seminars. Our information on her views comes from accounts by her students: David Kelley, *Evidence of the Senses* (1986) and Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism* (1993).

conceivably belong to the form rather than to the content of perception, just as Kant holds; though for Rand this result would have to be established by empirical science whereas Kant thinks he can prove this philosophically.) Second, the argument Rand uses to establish her position looks remarkably like an argument that Rand attributes (mistakenly, I think) to Kant – namely that because “man is *limited* to a consciousness of a specific nature, which perceives by specific means and no others, therefore, his consciousness is not valid”² – an argument Rand parodies as maintaining that “you can know nothing, because you know it by means of something. You are blind ... because you have eyes, and deaf, because you have ears.”³ How does Rand manage to end up with a position so similar to one that she regards as one of the worst mistakes in the history of philosophy?

Rand would deny that either her conclusion or her argument resembles those she attributes to Kant. Rand does not regard the mind-dependent nature of colour as impugning the reliability of the senses, since the judgment that a particular feature belongs to a perception’s content rather than its form is not inherent in the perception itself but is instead a fallible interpretation of that perception. Nor is the existence of features belonging to the form rather than the content of perception indicative of any flaw in our perceptual faculties; since any perceptual experience must have a form in addition to a content, to complain that some features of our experience belong only to the form is to complain that perception exists at all. Hence it is the complainer, rather than Rand, who is guilty of treating us as blind because we have eyes. Attributes that belong to the form rather than the content of our perception are still attributes of the perceived entity – but *relational* attributes, consisting in the interaction between the entity and the perceiver; thus they are objective, not subjective.⁴ The difference between Rand and Kant, as Rand sees it, is that Kant takes the mind-dependence of perceptible properties to *invalidate* sense-perception.

Here I think Rand misunderstands Kant. Rand takes Kant’s claim that we perceive only appearances rather than things in themselves as a claim that we perceive only unreal things rather than real ones. But I suggest that the phrase “in themselves” should be read adverbially rather than adjectivally; that is, things in themselves and things as they appear to us are not two different kinds of things, but rather the same things considered in two ways. For Kant, then – although admittedly his wording can encourage misunderstanding – it is not the objects we see, but rather the way we see them, that is mind-dependent. Hence what Kant means in saying that we cannot perceive things in themselves is not radically different from what Rand means in saying that some aspects of an object’s appearance must inevitably belong to a form contributed by our means of perception. After all, the claim that knowledge can be objective despite taking a mind-dependent form is not exactly an anti-Kantian position.

But regardless of whether Rand gets Kant exegesis right, we can ask how well Rand’s position stands up in its own right. It is true, of course, that what properties we perceive objects as having depends on how we are perceptually related to them. That, for example, is why I currently see your fronts and not your backs or your insides; of the many properties you possess, which ones I see

² *For the New Intellectual* (1961), p. 32.

³ *Journals* (1997), pp. 654-655.

⁴ For Rand, features belonging to our awareness independent of the object are *subjective*, features belonging to the object independent of our awareness are *intrinsic*, and features inhering in the relation between awareness and its object are *objective*.

depends on where I am located in relation to you, as well as on the fact that I don't have x-ray vision, cannot see around corners, cannot see in the ultraviolet or infrared, etc. But it simply does not follow that any of the properties I *do* see you as having must depend for their *existence* on the way I am perceptually related to you; and thus it does not follow that some apparent features of a perception's content *must* belong instead to its form. To suppose otherwise would be, as Wittgenstein might put it, to assume that all the stagehands must appear in the onstage performance. Thus while Kant is closer to Rand than she supposes, Rand is still closer to Kant than she should be. Rand grants, indeed insists, that perception can be causally mediated yet epistemically immediate; why should she not admit, in the same spirit, that perception can be dependent on form without the form showing up in the putative content?

Since perceptual experience does not by its nature require any of the putative aspects of its content to belong instead to its form, we might justifiably complain of perception's inaccuracy if any of them should turn out to do so, without being guilty of complaining about the existence of perception *per se*. Hence if Rand were right about the status of colour, I think this would mean, contrary to Rand's inference, that colours are *illusory*. However, I also see no reason to suppose that Rand *is* right about the status of colour, and so no reason to deny that colours are mind-independent features of external objects.