

# ON THE PARTICULARITY OF EXPERIENCE

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Phenomenal particularism is the view that particular external objects are sometimes part of the phenomenal character of perceptual experience. It is a central part of naïve realist or relational views of perception. We consider a series of recent objections to phenomenal particularism and argue that naïve realism has the resources to block them. In particular, we show that these objections rest on assumptions about the nature of phenomenal character that the naïve realist will reject, and that they ignore the full resources that naïve realism has to offer in explaining phenomenal character.

## 1. Introduction

How should we characterise the phenomenal character of perceptual experience? According to *phenomenal particularism*, particular external objects are sometimes part of the phenomenal character of perceptual experience. There has been a great deal of discussion of phenomenal particularism in the recent philosophy of perception literature (see, e.g., Soteriou (2000), Schellenberg (2010), Montague (2011)). Three common motivations are often given in support (Sturgeon 2008, pp. 120-122):

1. Epistemic motivations: perceptual experience enables us to know truths about the particular items around us in the world. (McDowell 1982)

2. Semantic motivations: perceptual experience enables us to directly refer to and think about the particular items around us in the world. (McDowell 1986, Campbell 2002)

3. Phenomenological motivations: perceptual experience seems to present us with the particular items around us in the world. (Martin 2002).

In this paper we defend phenomenal particularism against a series of arguments that have recently been put forward by Neil Mehta ('The limited role of particulars in phenomenal experience', *Journal of Philosophy*). This defence matters because phenomenal particularism is a central tenet of naïve realist or relational conceptions of perceptual experience. Much attention has been paid in recent years to naïve realist accounts of perceptual experience and it would be a significant result if it could be shown to be false. We argue, however, that Mehta's objections have no force against his naïve realist opponents. And we trace back the failure of his objections to unargued assumptions about the nature of phenomenal character – assumptions which Mehta accepts but which his opponents will reject. This will allow us to make some general points about the role introspective claims about phenomenal character play in assessing the truth of naïve realism and about the resources available to the naïve realist in explaining phenomenal character.

## 2. Phenomenal Particularism

Phenomenal particularism is a thesis about the phenomenal character of experience. Mehta explains phenomenal character as 'what it's like to have an experience' (p. 311). We will follow this characterisation. Phenomenal particularism is the claim that the phenomenal character of experience sometimes contains external particulars as parts.

Who endorses phenomenal particularism? Mehta cites the following: Brewer (2011), Campbell (2002), Fish (2009), Martin (2004) and (2006). We will follow the standard nomenclature in the philosophy of perception literature and refer to these authors as *naïve realists*. However it is worth being clear about why each of these authors counts as endorsing phenomenal particularism. They endorse it only for a *subset* of experiences namely those involved in (at least some) genuine cases of perception. Brewer, Campbell, Fish and Martin endorse certain views about the nature of perceptual experience: namely that the experiences involved in (at least

some) genuine cases of perception involve external particulars as constituents or parts in some sense. As Martin puts it ‘The naive realist claims that some sensory experiences are relations to mind-independent objects. That is to say, taking experiences to be episodes or events, the naive realist supposes that some such episodes have as constituents mind-independent objects’ (2006, p. 354). Such naive realist claims about the nature of experience (as with opposing sense-datum, or intentionalist claims) are about the nature of the phenomenal character of experience. On these naive realist views, external particulars are, as Mehta would put it ‘sometimes part of the phenomenal character of experience’. Naive realism is thus a version of phenomenal particularism in Mehta’s sense, restricted to just some experiences.

Mehta presents two (sets of) objections to phenomenal particularism. The first turns on issues involving imaginative experiences; the second on the fact that we can have phenomenologically different experiences of the same object. We will discuss each set of objections in turn before turning to the assumption which underlies Mehta’s discussion.

### 3. Imagination

Mehta’s first objection concerns imaginative experiences. Although he takes it to be only a *prima facie* objection (p. 315), it is worth engaging with since it involves an assumption about the nature of phenomenal character which needs making explicit. In broad terms, the objection holds that phenomenal particularism is committed to providing an ‘ontologically messy’ (p. 317) or ‘disunified’ (p. 315) account of phenomenal character.

Mehta begins by distinguishing *pure* and *impure* phenomenal particularism: pure phenomenal particularism holds that ‘the phenomenal character of any experience is composed wholly of particulars’; impure phenomenal particularism holds that ‘some phenomenal character includes particulars and some phenomenal character includes non-particulars (plausibly, properties)’ (p. 315). He holds that there is a conclusive objection to pure phenomenal particularism: ‘some imaginative experiences have phenomenal characters which clearly include no particulars’ (p. 315). Since none of the authors Mehta cites endorse pure phenomenal particularism, we will put the view to one side.

Impure phenomenal particularism involves two claims: that there are some experiences which have a phenomenal character which includes particulars and that there are some experiences which have a phenomenal character which includes non-particulars. Since Mehta takes ‘includes’ in the first clause to mean ‘includes as parts’, we assume that this is how he intends the second use of ‘includes’. The first clause is equivalent to the definition of phenomenal particularism. We have agreed above that it is endorsed by naïve realists. But the second clause is an additional commitment. Mehta seems to think that it follows from the fact that there are experiences the phenomenal character of which doesn’t include particulars as parts, that the phenomenal character of those experiences must include non-particulars as parts. It doesn’t.

Consider Martin’s account of hallucinatory experiences. According to Martin, the phenomenal character of causally matching hallucinations is exhausted by the negative epistemic criterion. More specifically, Martin argues that for causally matching hallucinations, ‘there is no more to the phenomenal character of such experiences than that of being indiscriminable from’ a corresponding visual perception (2006, p. 369). And as Martin spells out ‘being indiscriminable from’ is to be understood in a negative epistemic way, roughly, as a matter of being not knowably distinct, by means of introspection. It is open, then, for a naïve realist to hold that the phenomenal character of at least some imaginative experiences is similarly exhausted by the negative epistemic criterion and this doesn’t require holding that the phenomenal character of such experiences includes non-particulars as parts.

Or consider the account of the phenomenal character of imagistic sensory imaginative experience offered by Martin in his (2002). According to Martin, such experience is subject to the *dependency thesis* according to which to imagine sensorily an  $F$  (e.g., a red cube) is to imagine experiencing an  $F$  (p. 404). So, on the phenomenal particularist model, the phenomenal character of an imaginative experience is explained by the subject representing a perceptual experience which involves external particulars as parts. Since a state which represents an experience involving external particulars as parts needn’t itself have those particulars as parts, this account of imaginative experience denies particularism about imaginative experiences. But it needn’t think that in representing a perceptual experience, imaginative experiences involve non-particulars as parts. This provides an alternative way of explaining the phenomenal

character of imaginative experiences compatible with phenomenal particularism and without taking the phenomenal character of imaginative experience to include non-particulars as parts.

We can put these complications to one side: the objection that Mehta raises doesn't turn on which account of the phenomenal character of imaginative experience naïve realists endorse. The problem with impure phenomenal particularism is that it provides an account of phenomenal character which is 'ontologically disunified' (p. 315). This is because it gives different explanations of the phenomenal character of imaginative experiences and the phenomenal character of genuine perceptual experiences: in one case the phenomenal character of experience is explained by its containing external particulars as parts, in the other case it is explained in some other way. This holds also for the two alternative forms of phenomenal particularism we note above. So all forms of phenomenal particularism will be committed to ontological disunity.

The question is whether this is an objection: why should we expect an account of the phenomenal character of imaginative experience and an account of the phenomenal character of perceptual experience to be ontologically unified? Mehta appeals to something like Occam's Razor: 'Any simple view about the ontological nature of the parts of phenomenal character, such as the view that phenomenal character includes only properties... has a substantial *prima facie* advantage over impure phenomenal particularism' (p. 315). His reasoning appears to be that unified explanations of phenomenal character are to be preferred to disunified explanations.

Considerations of simplicity and parsimony only apply when we are comparing explanations of the same phenomenon. So for Mehta's objection to be any good, there must be some thing – the phenomenal character of experience – which needs explaining in both the imaginative and perceptual case. Mehta supports this assumption by appeal to an *ideal imaginer*, one 'whose imaginative experiences are as vivid, stable, and forceful as her genuine perceptual experiences' (p. 316). Such a subject's imaginative and perceptual experiences 'obviously have substantial similarities in phenomenal character. But... impure phenomenal particularism cannot capture this' (p. 316).

Does the ideal imaginer support the claim that we ought to provide an ontologically unified account of phenomenal character? We can contrast the case of ideal imagination with the case of subjectively indistinguishable hallucinations – a case which has received much discussion in the literature on naïve realism. On the assumption that subjectively indistinguishable hallucinations don't involve external particulars as parts, phenomenal particularism is committed to thinking of them as having a different phenomenal character from genuine perceptual experiences. It follows that subjectively indistinguishable hallucinations do not have the same phenomenal character as genuine perceptual experiences: subjective indistinguishability does not suffice for sameness of phenomenal character. Since naïve realists are committed to denying the move from subjective indistinguishability to sameness of phenomenal character, they will hold that the case of the ideal imaginer gives no reason to think that imaginative experiences have the same phenomenal character as perceptual experiences.

We won't rehearse the discussions concerning the tenability of this denial here: all the naïve realists listed above endorse it and it has been a focal point in the philosophy of perception literature (see, e.g., Martin (1997), Siegel (2008), and Smith (2008)). What matters for Mehta's objection is that the claim that subjective indistinguishability does not suffice for sameness of phenomenal character allows the phenomenal particularist to deny that imaginative experiences and genuine perceptual experiences have the same phenomenal character. Since they don't have the same phenomenal character, it can hardly be a desideratum on an account of phenomenal character that it provide an ontologically unified account of the phenomenal character of imaginative and perceptual experiences. This draws out something which is missed in Mehta's discussion: that naïve realism takes itself to be providing an account of the phenomenal character of just the experiences involved in (some cases of) genuine perception. The fact that the same account cannot be provided for imaginative experiences is no objection unless one already assumes that both cases must be treated the same. And Mehta has given us no reason for assuming so.

More generally, it's unclear to us how the case of the ideal imaginer is meant to improve on the case of subjectively indistinguishable hallucinations, cases which have long been recognised to pose a challenge to naïve realism. If anything it seems to us – purely phenomenologically – that the denial that imaginative experiences and perceptual experiences have the same phenomenal character is much more plausible than the

denial that genuine perceptual experiences and subjectively indistinguishable hallucinations have the same phenomenal character. So the phenomenal particularist's response looks stronger for the case of imaginative experiences than it does for hallucination.

Be that as it may. The point is that the fact of ontological messiness is only objectionable if one assumes that imaginative experiences have the same phenomenal character as genuinely perceptual experiences. Since this will simply be denied by the phenomenal particularist, there is no theoretical virtue in an account which gives an ontologically unified explanation of the phenomenal character of imaginative experiences and the phenomenal character of perceptual experiences. Ontological disunity poses no problem.

Finally, note that the only reason Mehta gives us for thinking that imaginative and perceptual experiences have the same phenomenal character is that we can imagine subjectively indistinguishable imaginative and perceptual experiences. And this assumes that phenomenal character of experience is transparent to us: that we can move from two experiences being indistinguishable to them having the same phenomenal character. But this assumption is rejected by naïve realists. In the terminology of Martin (2004), the phenomenal particularist is committed to a modest view of what a subject can know about the phenomenal character of her own experiences on the basis of introspection. Immodest accounts of our knowledge of the phenomenal character of our own experiences has come under attack recently, both philosophically (Williamson 2000) and empirically (Schwitzgebel 2008). Mehta's objections to phenomenal particularism assume an immodest account of such knowledge.

This draws out something that Martin has long emphasised: debates about the phenomenal character of perceptual experience intersect with issues concerning our access to the phenomenal aspects of our mind. Ignoring the second of these issues can lead one to think one has good objections to positions in the first. The truth or falsity of phenomenal particularism will not be settled by phenomenologically motivated counter-examples but by reflection on the kind of access we have to our own minds and its implications for perceptual experience.

To conclude: Mehta's first objection relies on an assumption about the phenomenal character of experience which phenomenal particularists already have reason to reject. There is no objection here to phenomenal particularism.

#### 4. The Similarities of Experiences

Mehta's second objection is that 'the phenomenal particularist makes implausible predictions about similarities and differences in phenomenal character' (p. 317). He considers this objection in three forms, taking only the last one to be dialectically effective. It will be worth going through each of his cases.

The first concerns the experience of distinct but perceptually indistinguishable objects. The objection runs as follows: these experiences include different external particulars. So according to phenomenal particularism they have different phenomenal characters. But they have the same phenomenal character. So phenomenal particularism is false. Mehta renounces this objection because he holds that it is open to the phenomenal particularist to say that although the experiences have different token parts, they have parts of just the same type, and that suffices for them having the same phenomenal character.

We're not sure how this response on behalf of phenomenal particularism is meant to work or whether or not it is compatible with the naïve realist authors under consideration. But that doesn't matter, because there is a simpler reason why the objection is dialectically ineffective: it assumes that the experiences of distinct but perceptually indistinguishable objects have the same phenomenal character. And, as we have seen above, this will be denied by the phenomenal particularist (Brewer, for instance is quite explicit about this – see his (2011), p. 98). Mehta recognises this, citing Soteriou (2000) in a footnote who notes that the challenge of explaining the perceptual indistinguishability of distinct but perceptually indistinguishable objects can be met by recognising that my experience of each twin makes me aware of precisely the same external properties. This is not enough, Mehta claims, because 'the challenge is to explain *the sameness in phenomenal character of my experiences* of [distinct but perceptually indistinguishable objects]' (fn. 18). Yet whether there is sameness of phenomenal character is precisely what is at issue.

The second form of the objection concerns perceptual and hallucinatory experiences. It runs as follows: there are hallucinatory experiences which are subjectively indistinguishable from perceptual experiences. Since the latter contain external particulars as parts which the former lack, they have different phenomenal characters according to phenomenal particularism. But they have the same phenomenal character. So phenomenal particularism is false.

The problem with this objection, as Mehta realises, is that phenomenal particularists will deny that perceptual and hallucinatory experiences have the same phenomenal character. This denial has been at the forefront of much discussion in the debate about naïve realism, but Mehta gives us no reason here to think it is problematic. So far we have no objection to phenomenal particularism.

The third form of the objection is meant to be decisive. Instead of considering indistinguishable experiences of different objects, Mehta considers disistinguishable experiences of the same object (p. 318ff). Two examples are provided. The first concerns the difference in phenomenal character involved in experiencing the same object in different sense-modalities. The second concerns seeing the same person from the front and back. The objection is as follows: these experiences have the same external particular as a part. So according to phenomenal particularism, they have the same phenomenal character. They don't have the same phenomenal character. So phenomenal particularism is false.

This objection is no better than the others. The problem is with the second step in the argument. It doesn't follow from the fact that these experiences have the same external particular as a part that they have the same phenomenal character according to phenomenal particularism. Mehta's argument assumes that the particularist or naïve realist is committed to the idea that if these experiences differ in phenomenal character, then they must differ in the particulars they constitutively involve. But, contra how Mehta construes their position, naïve realists are simply not committed to the idea that the phenomenal character of experiences is *exhaustively constituted* by the particulars (even external property-instances) constitutively involved in those experiences. They *don't* hold that experience is radically transparent to its objects in the way that some sense-datum theorists did. They are thus not committed to the idea that sameness of external particulars (including property-instances) implies

sameness of character. This comes out clearly in, for instance, Martin (1998), Campbell (2009, 2011), and Brewer (2011).

Martin thinks that 'to have an experience is to have a viewpoint on something: experiences intrinsically possess some subject-matter which is presented to that viewpoint. To understand such experience and what it is like, one has to understand *that viewpoint on that subject-matter*, and hence also to attend to the subject-matter as presented to the viewpoint' (p. 173, emphasis added). Experiencing an object is experiencing it *from a particular viewpoint*. The phenomenology of experience is thus not exhausted by experience's subject-matter (what is presented to one).

Similarly Campbell says 'We have to factor in the standpoint from which the scene is being observed... You always experience an object from a standpoint' (2009, p. 657). And Campbell explains how this point is to figure in the proper way to conceive of the naive realist theory of experience: 'We should think of consciousness of an object not as a two-place relation between a person and an object, but as a three place relation between a person, a standpoint, and an object' (p. 657).

Campbell packs a lot into a standpoint. We can think of the standpoint involved in an experience as comprising an ensemble of various factors:

The notion of a standpoint must encompass more than merely the position of the observer... (p. 657)... to describe the standpoint explicitly we have to say which sensory modality is involved; and that will determine further factors we have to fill in. For example, suppose the modality is vision. Then we need, further, position, but also relative orientations of the view and object, how close the viewer is to the object, whether there is anything obstructing the light between them, and so on (p. 658).

And elsewhere he notes that 'Consideration of the dynamic aspects of perception will bring a lot of further factors into play: the focus of the subject's attention, the context of the subject's perceptions before the current moment, and so on' (2011, p. 49).

Finally, Brewer's development of his version of naive realism takes a similar form:

perceptual experience is a matter of a person's conscious acquaintance with various mind-independent physical objects from a given spatiotemporal point of view, in a particular sense-modality, and in certain specific circumstances of perception (such as lighting conditions in the case of vision). These factors effectively conjoin to constitute a third relatum of the relation of conscious acquaintance that holds between perceivers and the mind-independent physical objects of their perceptual experience (Brewer 2011), p. 96)... This has the effect of integrating what may often be regarded as factors to be cited in explanation of why a person has the specific perceptual experience that he does on certain occasions into the constitutive account of the nature of his perceptual experience itself (p. 100, fn 5).

If experience, on the naive realist picture, is a simple two-place relation between a subject and an object, and the object is held to be all there is to the phenomenal character of the experience, then it may be hard to see how distinct experiences in different modalities, holding fixed the object, can have different phenomenal characters. And it may be hard to see how experiences of the same individual from two different points of view can have different phenomenal characters. But this is at best a caricature of the view, as the passages above make clear. Brewer is quite explicit about how invoking the 'third relatum' in the account of perceptual experience forestalls the implausible idea that distinct experiences of intrinsically the same object in distinct modalities or from different points of view must have the same phenomenal character (p. 96).

These quotes indicate that naive realism is not committed to the claim that sameness of external particular entails sameness of phenomenal character. Thus Mehta's argument against naïve realism fails. As Campbell puts it - in a sentence which exactly maps onto the two forms of Mehta's objection:

[i]f we had only the two-place relation between the perceiver and the scene, that would not allow us to differentiate an object being touched from an object being seen, or an object viewed from one angle from the same object being viewed from another angle (2011, p. 48)

The addition of a third component into the naive realist account allows it to avoid Mehta's objection, and this third component should not be neglected in evaluating naïve realism.

To conclude: none of these objections has any force against the phenomenal particularist. The first two rest on the assumption that subjectively indistinguishable experiences have the same phenomenal

character; the third ignores the resources actually invoked by phenomenal particularists.

## 5. Conclusion

Mehta presents us with two sets of objections to phenomenal particularism. And he means these objections to have force against naive realist accounts of perceptual experience. The first set of objections assume that subjectively indistinguishable experiences have the same phenomenal character. The second set of objections assume that phenomenal particularists must hold that experiences of the same external particular have the same phenomenal character. Both assumptions are rejected by naive realism.

Our discussion allows us to draw out two general morals. First, in arguing against naïve realism we cannot just *assume* an immodest account of our knowledge of phenomenal character. If any such account is to inform an argument against naïve realism, it has to be earned. Second, in arguing against naïve realism we should draw on the full resources the account has to offer. In particular, naïve realists can exploit the *standpoint* from which one perceives, in addition to the objects of perception, in accounting for the phenomenal character of experience. (Mehta is not alone in neglecting this, see also Block 2010.) We have been given no reason to reject phenomenal particularism.

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