

# The common kind theory and the concept of perceptual experience

Neil Mehta, Yale-NUS College

*Abstract:* In this paper, I advance a new hypothesis about what the ordinary concept of perceptual experience might be. To a first approximation, my hypothesis is that it is the concept of something that seems to present mind-independent objects. Along the way, I reveal two important errors in Michael Martin's argument for the very different view that the ordinary concept of perceptual experience is the concept of something that is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception. This conceptual work is significant because it provides three pieces of good news for the common kind theorist.

In this paper, I will advance a new hypothesis about what the concept of (conscious) perceptual experience might be. To a first approximation, my hypothesis is that the ordinary concept of perceptual experience is the concept of something that seems to present mind-independent objects (§7-§8). However, the starting point for my discussion, and indeed my foil throughout, will be Michael Martin's famous *negative semantic view* that the ordinary concept of a perceptual experience is just the concept of something that is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception (§1).<sup>1</sup> Martin has given a complex and influential argument for this view,<sup>2</sup> but I will highlight what I believe to be two serious errors in that argument (§2-§5).

Why does any of this matter, though? Because it bears in three ways on the debate between *common kind theorists*, who hold that any perception and any matching hallucination belong to the same fundamental kind,<sup>3,4</sup> and *metaphysical disjunctivists*, who say that they belong to different fundamental kinds.<sup>5</sup>

For one thing, Martin thinks that if the negative semantic view is true, then metaphysical disjunctivism should be our default view. The burden of proof would be on the common kind theorist to dislodge us from this default position. By blocking Martin's argument for the negative semantic view, I also block this further argument (§6, §9). In addition, a standard metaphysical disjunctivist view is that what it is to be a matching hallucination is simply to be something that is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception. The presentational semantic view will turn out to entail that this is false. Finally, the presentational semantic view will end up supporting the conclusion that if

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<sup>1</sup> Martin (2004, p. 37).

<sup>2</sup> I will be focusing on Martin's most detailed presentation of the argument, which is in his (2004, pp. 47-52). But see also Martin (2006), which briefly revisits parts of this argument.

<sup>3</sup> The common kind theory has so many advocates that it would be tedious to cite them all. Still, for some paradigms, see Tye (1995); Schellenberg (2018).

<sup>4</sup> As I explain in detail in Mehta (forthcoming), the notion of a fundamental kind has been developed in several subtly different ways. See for example Martin (2006, pp. 360-361); Brewer (2011, p. 3); Logue (2012b, p. 174) and (2013, p. 109).

<sup>5</sup> Metaphysical disjunctivists (or those who accept some nearby view) include Hinton (1967); Campbell (2002); Martin (2004) and (2006); Snowdon (2005); Fish (2009); Nudds (2009); Brewer (2011); Logue (2012); Allen (2015); Genone (2016); Miracchi (2017); Moran (2018); French and Gomes (2019). For a bracingly clear overview of different forms of metaphysical disjunctivism, see Soteriou (2016).

perceptual experiences exist, then they all share a reasonably natural property; equivalently, they belong to a reasonably natural kind (§9).<sup>6</sup>

None of this entails the common kind theory, but all of it is good news for the common kind theorist.

## 1. The positive and negative semantic views introduced

Let an *experience-grounding property* be any property such that, if an entity<sup>7</sup> has that property, then, and purely in virtue of that, the entity is a perceptual experience. And let us say that for a property to be *perception-dependent* is for its essence to be characterized in terms of perception. Now consider this obvious, if schematic, view about what the ordinary concept of perceptual experience is:

The *positive semantic view*: The ordinary concept of a perceptual experience is the concept of something that has a certain property *E* that is introspectible, experience-grounding, and not perception-dependent.<sup>8</sup>

This schema can be completed in various ways. For example, a sense-datum theorist might say that *E* is the property of presenting certain qualities of sense-data; a representationalist might say that *E* is the property of being a perceptual representation of your environment. (I think that both of these particular suggestions are implausible, but later I will make what I hope is a much better suggestion.)

Put the positive semantic view together with the obvious truth that perceptual experiences exist, and you get the conclusion that there is a property *E* that is introspectible, experience-grounding, and not perception-dependent. Some philosophers have thought that this conclusion lends some support to the *common kind theory*, which says that any veridical perception and matching hallucination belong to the same fundamental kind.<sup>9</sup> The idea, which we will return to later, would be that any perceptual experience belongs to the fundamental kind characterized by *E*. (The support is not decisive: perhaps entities that possess *E* could belong to different fundamental kinds.)

So suppose that you are a *metaphysical disjunctivist* – suppose that you think that any veridical perception and matching hallucination belong to different fundamental kinds.<sup>10</sup> Then you might be in the market for a different view of the concept of perceptual experience. The most popular view of this sort has been:

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<sup>6</sup> I use the expressions *reasonably natural property* and *natural kind* in the sense of Lewis (1983).

<sup>7</sup> I use the term “entity” as an especially broad sortal that includes properties, objects, events, states, etc.

<sup>8</sup> Martin dubs this the “immodest view” (2004, pp. 47–48). However, since this is precisely the view that I wish to defend, I prefer the less prejudicial label given above. In addition, Martin does not speak of just one property *E*; he speaks of a whole host of properties  $E_1 \dots E_n$ . But you can think of *E* as the conjunction of  $E_1 \dots E_n$ .

<sup>9</sup> For a few advocates of the common kind theory, see fn. 3.

<sup>10</sup> For advocates of metaphysical disjunctivism, see fn. 5.

The *negative semantic view*: The ordinary concept of a perceptual experience is the concept of something that is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception.<sup>11</sup>

The qualifier *impersonal* is intended to account for the fact that some creatures (e.g., dogs) can hallucinate despite being too cognitively simple to discriminate any experience from any other. The idea is to appeal to what can be discriminated via introspection in general, rather than by any particular subject.<sup>12</sup>

There is an argument for the negative semantic view, developed by Michael Martin, that has been enormously influential. In overview, it goes like this. Recall that the positive semantic theorist posits a property *E* that is introspectible, experience-grounding, and not perception-dependent. Martin first argues that if the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is infallible at telling when *E* is *absent*. Martin then argues separately that if the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is also infallible at telling when *E* is *present*. These conclusions, taken together, are supposed to reveal that the positive semantic theorist must attribute extravagant epistemic powers to introspection. Thus Martin thinks that, at least as a default, we should accept the negative semantic view.

As a prelude to developing the positive semantic view, I will spend the next several sections showing that Martin's argument contains at least two serious errors. Because his argument is unusually intricate, I will be using a wide-angle lens for the most part. I will zoom in only as required for my critical discussion.

## 2. The first part of Martin's argument

The first part of Martin's argument is intended to show that if the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is infallible at telling when *E* is *absent*. Martin begins this part of the argument by making the following supposition, just for the sake of argument:

1. There exists an event *A* that (i) does not have *E* but (ii) is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception of a street scene.<sup>13</sup>

Now, the positive semantic view tells us that the commonsense concept of a perceptual experience of a street scene is simply the concept of an event that has *E*. But 1 tells us that *A* does not have *E*. Thus:

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<sup>11</sup> Again, see Martin (2004, pp. 75-76) and (2006, §5). Martin takes inspiration from Hinton (1967). I have departed from Martin's presentation in a few minor ways, however. First, Martin dubs this the "modest view," but I will argue that there is nothing particularly modest about it; thus I prefer the more informative label given in the text. Second, Martin inquires into the ordinary concept of *a perceptual experience of a street scene*, but for our purposes I find it more helpful to inquire more generally into the ordinary concept of *perceptual experience*.

<sup>12</sup> See Martin (2004, pp. 74-81) and (2006, pp. 379-96).

<sup>13</sup> Martin (2004, p. 49).

2. If the positive semantic view is correct, then commonsense does not classify *A* as a perceptual experience of a street scene.<sup>14</sup>

Next, Martin observes that whether or not the *naïve realist* theory of perception is true, it at least best reflects how a veridical experience of a street scene *introspectively seems* to be. That is, it *introspectively seems* that a veridical perception of a street scene is the kind of experience that it is in virtue of presenting certain mind-independent things: say, lampposts, mailboxes, and so on. Hence:

3. If an event is a veridical perception of a street scene, then it introspectively seems that this event is the kind of experience that it is in virtue of presenting lampposts, mailboxes, etc.<sup>15</sup>

Now, consider the contrasting claim that it introspectively seems that a veridical perception of a street scene is the kind of experience that it is *in virtue of having E*. Martin suggests that this claim would contradict 3, since it would no longer introspectively seem that the event is a veridical perception of a street scene in virtue of presenting lampposts, mailboxes, etc. So:

4. If an event is a veridical perception of a street scene, then it does not introspectively seem that this event is the kind of experience that it is in virtue of having *E*.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, a hallucination of a street scene will introspectively seem to be just like a perception of a street scene. So, given 3:

5. If an event is a hallucination of a street scene, then it introspectively seems that this event is the kind of experience that it is in virtue of presenting lampposts, mailboxes, etc.<sup>17</sup>

Martin then asks why commonsense treats both a perception and a hallucination of a street scene as a *perceptual experience* of a street scene: what, according to commonsense, binds these experiences together? 4 suggests that it is not the fact (if it is a fact) that each experience has *E*. Rather, 3 and 5 suggest that it is that each experience introspectively seems to present the elements of a street scene. Thus, by something like inference to the best explanation over 3-5, Martin arrives at:

6. If it introspectively seems that an event presents lampposts, mailboxes, etc., then commonsense classifies this event as a perceptual experience of a street scene.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp. 49-50.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

But 1 tells us that event  $A$  is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception of a street scene. So it must introspectively seem that  $A$  presents lampposts, mailboxes, etc. Putting this together with 6, we get:

7. Commonsense classifies  $A$  as a perceptual experience of a street scene.<sup>19</sup>

But given 2, this entails that the positive semantic view is incorrect. So the positive semantic theorist must reject our starting assumption, 1: she must say that an event like  $A$  cannot exist. In other words, she must say that if an event does not have  $E$ , then it *can* be told apart, by introspection alone, from a veridical perception of a street scene. But if you can know that about some event, then surely you can know that this event is not a perceptual experience of a street scene! So:

8. If the positive semantic view is true, then: if an event does not have  $E$ , then it can be known by introspection alone that this event does not have  $E$ .<sup>20</sup>

And this is the conclusion of the first part of Martin's argument: if the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is infallible at telling when  $E$  is absent.

However, I believe that this argument goes wrong at an early stage.

### 3. An objection

Return to Martin's inference from 3 to 4:

3. If an event is a veridical perception of a street scene, then it introspectively seems that this event is the kind of experience that it is in virtue of presenting lampposts, mailboxes, etc.
4. If an event is a veridical perception of a street scene, then it does not introspectively seem that this event is the kind of experience that it is in virtue of having  $E$ .

Recall Martin's justification: it would contradict 3 to say that it introspectively seems that an event is a veridical perception of a street scene *in virtue of having*  $E$ .

I submit that this reasoning is mistaken. My concern is that there can be *contradictory seemings*: it can simultaneously seem to be the case that  $p$  and that *not- $p$* . This can happen in all sorts of domains, and for all sorts of reasons.

For example, there is the waterfall illusion, in which it simultaneously seems that a body of water is moving and is still; or, for a quite different example, there have been times when it has simultaneously seemed to me that my conscious experiences *must* be physical and that they *could not possibly* be physical. Most saliently for our purposes, there can be contradictory seemings about what makes something the kind of thing that it is: for instance, it has simultaneously seemed

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

true to some philosophers that I am the person that I am purely in virtue of having a particular body and, incompatibly, purely in virtue of having a particular brain.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, there is no obstacle, in principle, to its seeming to be the case that an event is a veridical perception of a street scene *both* in virtue of having *E* and, *incompatibly*, in virtue presenting lampposts, mailboxes, etc. This would just be a case of contradictory seemings.

It is not hard to see how such seemings might arise here. For suppose that you think that your veridical perception of a street scene is the kind of event that it is in virtue of having a certain introspectible property *F*. Now, it might happen that when you introspect on this veridical perception, it seems to you that anything with *F* must *really* present lampposts, mailboxes, etc. But at the same time, it might happen that when you reflect on the possibility of hallucinations, it seems to you, incompatibly with the previous seeming, that these experiences – which do not *really* present lampposts or mailboxes, but merely *seem* to do so – can have *F* as well. Then you would suffer from contradictory seemings about your perception.

In any case, this is just one suggestion about how we might end up with contradictory seemings of this sort. I am sure that you can think of others. From this, I conclude that 3 does not support 4.

Some will worry that I must have missed something. For we can all agree that there can be contradictory seemings; the point is so obvious that surely Martin would not have overlooked it.<sup>22</sup> To this I reply that it is very clear that Martin is making the inference that I find problematic. As he puts it:

[W]e supposed that reflection on experience offers support to a Naïve realist construal of sensory experience.... Even if the experience [of a street scene] does also possess [property *E*], ... it is at least not manifest that the experience is the kind of experience it is in virtue of the presence of [property *E*] as opposed to being Naïve realist – for if it were, then clearly it would not even seem to us as if Naïve realism is true. (2004, p. 49)

It should not be terribly surprising that a philosopher might overlook a clear counterexample: what is obvious after the fact need not be obvious beforehand. That is why the justified true belief account of knowledge was so popular before Gettier and so unpopular afterwards.

Still, for the sake of philosophical investigation, I will bracket this objection and consider the remainder of Martin's argument.

#### 4. The second part of Martin's argument

Martin continues his argument with the following claim:

9. If the positive semantic view is true, then: if an event has *E*, then it can be known by introspection alone that this event has *E*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> I thank my undergraduate student Xianda Wen for the astute observation that seemings are sometimes inconsistent.

<sup>22</sup> I owe this concern to an anonymous referee.

<sup>23</sup> Martin (2004, pp. 50-51).

The idea is that it is just built into the positive semantic view that *E* is introspectible. Martin takes 9 to be a straightforward consequence of this fact.

Now, the first part of Martin's argument concluded that the positive semantic view must treat introspection as infallible at detecting the *absence* of *E*, and 9 tells us that the positive semantic view must likewise treat introspection as infallible at detecting the *presence* of *E*. Putting this together, we get:

10. If the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is infallible at detecting both the presence and the absence of *E*.<sup>24</sup>

On the basis of 10, Martin thinks that the positive semantic view must attribute extravagant epistemic powers to introspection.<sup>25</sup> This would be a significant theoretical cost, and one that we need not pay if we accept the negative semantic view. Thus, Martin arrives at:

11. If 10 is true, then the negative semantic view should be our default view.<sup>26</sup>

And, of course, 10 and 11 entail:

12. The negative semantic view should be our default view.

This, at last, is the conclusion of Martin's entire argument.

But I believe that this second part of Martin's argument contains another serious error.

## 5. Another objection

Return to:

9. If the positive semantic view is true, then: if an event has *E*, then it can be known by introspection alone that this event has *E*.

Alex Byrne and Heather Logue have raised a swift objection to this claim. I think that their objection does not quite succeed on its own; Martin has a just reply to it, which turns on reinterpreting the underlined phrase above ("can be known by introspection alone"). Yet I also think that this reply opens Martin to a troubling dilemma. In this section I will trace out this dialectic.

Byrne and Logue start by identifying the consequent of 9, "the claim that (necessarily) when [the features that constitute *E*] are present, the subject is in a position to know that they are."<sup>27</sup> As they read Martin, "[this commitment] is just

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pp. 50-51.

<sup>25</sup> At least, assuming that some perceptual experiences exist. (Otherwise there are no events that instantiate *E*, so telling whether or not an event instantiates these properties might turn out to be very easy.)

<sup>26</sup> Martin (2004, pp. 51-52).

<sup>27</sup> See their (2008, p. 75).

built into the opponent's position at the very start" – in other words, Martin takes 9 for granted.<sup>28</sup> Their objection is a quick one: they simply say that "there is no evident reason for doing this."<sup>29</sup>

Here is one way to develop their concern. Yes, the positive semantic view says, and it is plausible anyway, that *E* is *introspectible*. From this, Martin arrives at 9, which effectively says that on the positive semantic view, it can *always* be known by introspection alone that an event has *E* – but this inference is much too bold! By analogy, I might truly say that the color red is visible (by contrast with, say, the invisible colors in the infrared and ultraviolet parts of the spectrum). This does not commit me to the claim that if an object is red, then it can *always* be known by sight alone that it is red. After all, the object might be in the dark, or covered with cloth, or illuminated by trick lighting. Similarly, all that the positive semantic theorist means is that, in *typical, normal, or good* conditions, it can be known by introspection alone that an event has *E*. The positive semantic theorist does not have to say that in *all* conditions, it can be known by introspection alone that an event has *E*.

But perhaps Martin might offer a different defense of 9. For suppose that the positive semantic theorist is right: suppose that there is some introspectible property *E* that is experience-grounding. Martin might claim that any (rational and conceptually sophisticated) subject can introspectively identify any perceptual experience as such simply by undergoing it. But surely that requires *E* to be self-intimating! How else could subjects be so good at introspectively identifying their perceptual experiences, if not by introspectively identifying *E*?<sup>30</sup>

My response is to reject the claim that any rational and conceptually sophisticated subject can introspectively identify any perceptual experience as such simply by undergoing it. I think that some perceptual experiences cannot be introspectively identified as such by their subjects. Imagine for instance that I introspectively seem to experience a ringing sensation in my ears – a faint sound that seems to come from no particular direction. In fact, I might be *really hearing* a faint ambient ringing sound. In such a case, my perception would introspectively seem to be a sensation rather than a perceptual experience.<sup>31</sup>

So far, then, Martin has not given us good reason to accept 9 – again:

9. If the positive semantic view is true, then: if an event has *E*, then it can be known by introspection alone that this event has *E*.

However, we have been operating under the assumption that the underlined phrase has its ordinary meaning. I believe that Martin might reasonably defend 9 by suggesting a different way of understanding this phrase.

In particular, Martin famously develops an *impersonal* notion of ability. To illustrate the idea with our earlier analogy, Martin might suggest that if an object is red, then *in a certain impersonal sense*, it really can *always* be known by sight alone

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

<sup>31</sup> My objection presupposes that sensations are not perceptual experiences. Can Martin reinstate his argument by denying this? Perhaps – but at this point in the dialectic, the onus is on him to defend this claim. He does not do so.



that it is red – even if the object is in the dark or covered with cloth. After all, you can put the object in the light or remove the cloth, and then you can see that it is red. So if we use a similarly impersonal reading of the phrase “can be known by introspection alone,” then Martin might insist that 9 is in good shape after all.

Fair enough! But notice that this maneuver would leave Martin with a *very* attenuated understanding of what it is to be able to know that something is red by sight alone. Indeed, *if this is how we are speaking*, then it is even plausible to say that vision is *infallible* at detecting the presence or absence of redness. For, again, Martin is now counting a red object in the dark or covered by cloth as something that can be known to be red by sight alone, even though a perfectly rational, attentive, and keen-eyed subject might be looking directly at such an object without having the slightest clue that it is red.

Thus, on this approach, Martin’s claims are defensible only if he has in mind a similarly attenuated sense of what it is to be able to know by introspection alone that an event has *E*. Bearing that in mind, return to these claims:

10. If the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is infallible at detecting both the presence and the absence of *E*.
11. If 10 is true, then the negative semantic view should be our default view.

I have no objection to 10, but focus for a moment on its consequent – the claim that introspection is infallible at detecting the presence or absence of *E*. *Given how we are currently speaking*, this claim is not particularly bold. After all, it allows that a perfectly rational and attentive subject might carefully introspect a mental event without having the slightest clue whether or not it has *E*.

Once we understand this, we can appreciate that 11 is no longer supported. For Martin arrives at 11 by claiming that given 10, the positive semantic theorist must attribute extravagant epistemic powers to introspection. But, on the current reading of the argument, this is not the case! The epistemic power to detect *E* that the positive semantic theorist attributes to introspection is no more extravagant than the epistemic power to detect redness that we ordinarily attribute to vision.

I conclude that Martin’s argument faces a dilemma. If we interpret the crucial phrase “can be known by introspection alone” in the ordinary way, then 9 is unsupported; if we understand it using Martin’s notion of what is impersonally introspectible, then 11 is without support. Either way, Martin’s argument does not go through.

## 6. Taking stock

That concludes my assessment of Martin’s argument for the negative semantic view. This argument, I have claimed, contains at least two serious errors. First, Martin argues that if the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is infallible at telling when *E* is *absent*. But this part of the argument relies on the false assumption that there cannot be contradictory seemings. Second, Martin argues that if the positive semantic view is true, then introspection is also infallible at telling when *E* is *present*. But on one reading, this part of the argument misunderstands what the positive semantic theorist means when she says that *E*

is introspectible. And on another reading, the claim that introspection is infallible with respect to *E* turns out to be perfectly benign.

Suppose that this is right. Why is it significant?

One reason is that Martin goes on to argue that if the negative semantic view is true, then metaphysical disjunctivism should be our default view; the burden of proof would be on the common kind theorist to dislodge us from this default position. His reasoning is that if the negative semantic view is true, then when you say that you have a perceptual experience of a street scene, you are committed to nothing more than a disjunctive claim: the claim that *either* you are having a veridical perception of a street scene, *or* you are in a mental situation that is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from such a perception, even though it is not in fact such a perception. It would be an act of metaphysical boldness, requiring substantial further justification, to say that there must be a single fundamental kind of mental situation across both of these cases.<sup>32</sup> By showing that the negative semantic view is currently unsupported, I have also removed the support for Martin's further argument that metaphysical disjunctivism should be our default view.

To be clear, though, all that I have done so far is undermine the central argument *for* the negative semantic view. I have not argued, nor will I argue, that the negative semantic view is *false*. But I will observe that others have raised direct objections to the negative semantic view that strike me as powerful. In particular, it has been argued: first, that the negative semantic view is incompatible with the existence of perceptual experiences of the impossible, such as Escher staircases or supersaturated red;<sup>33</sup> second, that if this view were true, then a hallucination could not ground *positive* knowledge about one's experience;<sup>34</sup> third, that the view falsely predicts that a zombie could hallucinate;<sup>35</sup> and fourth, that the very notion of impersonal introspective indiscriminability is problematic.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, once Martin's argument for the negative semantic view has been washed away, I myself think that the prospects for the view are poor. And even if you do not agree, it is surely worth understanding what alternatives there might be before you settle on your final view. In the remainder of this paper, I develop one such alternative.

## 7. The presentational semantic view introduced

It is high time to try to fill out the positive semantic view. This view posits a property, *E*, that has several key features. First, *E* is introspectible in much the same sense that redness is visible: *in good cases*, we are capable of introspectively detecting the presence or absence of *E*. In addition, *E* is experience-grounding: if something has *E*, then, purely in virtue of that, it is a perceptual experience.

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<sup>32</sup> See Martin (2004, pp. 37-38).

<sup>33</sup> See Siegel (2004, p. 94). For a response, see Martin (2004, pp. 80-81). For what it is worth, I believe that Martin's response does not handle all of the problematic cases.

<sup>34</sup> See Siegel (2008, pp. 218-223). For responses, see Nudds (2009, pp. 342-343); Soteriou (2016, ch. 6).

<sup>35</sup> See Sturgeon (2008, p. 134). For a response, see Nudds (2009, p. 342).

<sup>36</sup> See Siegel (2008, pp. 211-214). For a response, see Nudds (2009, pp. 342-343). For the record, I believe that Siegel's objection is correct.

Finally, *E* is not perception-dependent: the essence of *E* is not characterized in terms of perception. What property might fit this bill?

Here is an idea. Suppose that you see a mango in front of you. But then you close your eyes. Now, although you no longer see the mango, you still *believe* that the mango is in front of you, and perhaps you also *visually remember* what the mango looks like. You might even *visually imagine*, in great detail, just what the mango would look like from different perspectives. But there is an obvious difference between your visual experience, on the one hand, and your belief, visual memory, and visual imagining, on the other hand. In a certain obvious sense, the mango seems to be *really there* for you, or *just given* to you, when you have the visual experience, but not when you have the belief, the visual memory, or the visual imagining. While it is hard to say precisely what this difference amounts to, it is perfectly evident that there is such a difference. I will refer to this by saying that only your visual experience *seems to present* the mango.<sup>37</sup>

What is important is that this phenomenon is found not only in ordinary perceptions, but also in ordinary hallucinations. There is the same important and obvious difference between merely hallucinating a mango, on the one hand, and abstractly believing, sensorily remembering, or sensorily imagining that there is a mango, on the other hand: all of these states or events have something to do with a mango, but only the hallucination *seems to present* a mango.

Nor is it only perceptual experiences that seem to present objects. Mere sensations also seem to present objects, e.g., phosphenes and afterimages. Still, here is one possible suggestion for what distinguishes sensations from perceptual experiences: when you experience a phosphene or an afterimage, its existence seems to depend on the existence of your mind, but when you see or even just hallucinate a mango, the existence of the mango does not seem to depend on the existence of your mind.

Thus, it is natural to fill out the positive semantic view by saying that *E* is simply the property of seeming to present *mind-independent* objects, understood as objects whose existence does not depend on the existence of the subject's mind (while leaving open that these objects might exist in a way that depends on the mind of other subjects, or the mind of God<sup>38</sup>). That gives us:

*The presentational semantic view:* It is a conceptual truth that what it is to be a perceptual experience is to seem to present mind-independent objects. (The property of seeming to present mind-independent objects is thus experience-grounding.) In addition, this property is introspectible, and it is not perception-dependent.<sup>39</sup>

Notice that the presentational semantic view, like the positive semantic view more broadly, does not entail the common kind theory. Take a particular

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<sup>37</sup> This phenomenon is well-known, though it has been called many different things – Millar (2014, p. 240) gives an especially perspicuous description of it under the heading of *object-immediacy*. For other influential descriptions of this phenomenon, see Broad (1952, p. 6); Alston (1999, p. 182); Sturgeon (2000, p. 9); Martin (2002, p. 413); Levine (2006, p. 179); and Brewer (2011, p. 2).

<sup>38</sup> For more discussion of these matters, see Mackie (2020).

<sup>39</sup> I thank my undergraduate student Siddharth Chatterjee for a conversation that brought this view into crisp focus.

veridical perception,  $V$ , of an orange mango. Since any perception is a perceptual experience, the presentational semantic view does entail that what it is *for  $V$  to be a perceptual experience* is for it to seem to present mind-independent objects. However, to arrive at the common kind theory, we would need the further assumption that the most fundamental kind to which  $V$  belongs is the kind *perceptual experience*, and likewise for any matching hallucination. It is open to the metaphysical disjunctivist to accept the presentational semantic view while denying this assumption. Still, for reasons that I will explain later, the presentational semantic view rules out one important version of metaphysical disjunctivism, while simultaneously cohering well with the common kind theory.

The presentational semantic view is deeply appealing to me. For I find it very plausible that what unites perceptions, illusions, and hallucinations is precisely that they *seem*, in some relevant sense, to present mind-independent objects.<sup>40</sup>

In what sense, though? The presentational semantic theorist's answer to this question must meet three conditions. First, the kind of seeming that she identifies cannot be conceptual. For a crow can have perceptual experiences, and thus, on the presentational semantic view, can have experiences that seem to present mind-independent objects. But a crow does not have the concepts of seeming, presentation, or mind-independence. Second, the presentational semantic theorist should say that sometimes, the relevant kind of seeming can occur in a way that the subject cannot introspectively identify. For, as I observed earlier, a subject can genuinely perceive an actual ambient ringing sound while mistaking it for a mere sensation – a mere ringing-in-the-ears. Finally, the kind of seeming at issue must not be perception-dependent; that much is simply built into the presentational semantic view.

I do not want to take a stand on precisely how the presentational semantic theorist should meet these conditions. Still, I will mention one option just as a proof of possibility, to show that all three conditions can be met. The idea is that seeming to present mind-independent objects is a matter of *purporting* to present such objects, which is in turn understood as consisting of sensory representations that play certain functional roles.

As per the first condition, we can say that this does not require the possession of any concepts whatsoever. Suppose for example that a crow sees a bowl of water. The crow's perceptual experience – her sensory representations – might purport to present a *mind-independent* portion of water simply in virtue of playing the right functional roles. For instance, the crow might be disposed to approach and drink if she is thirsty; and if she wants to manipulate the water, she

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<sup>40</sup> As an anonymous referee observes, this view is by no means irresistible. Another option is to say that perceptual experiences and sensations both simply seem to present *objects* (while remaining silent on their mind-independence); perhaps perceptual experiences and sensations even belong to the same fundamental kind. If this is right, then we might instead consider:

The *variant presentational semantic view*: It is a conceptual truth that what it is to be a perceptual experience or sensation is to seem to present objects. (The property of seeming to present objects is thus experience-grounding.) In addition, this property is introspectible, and it is not perception-dependent.

For the sake of simplicity, however, I will continue to work with the view in the text.

might be disposed to interact with it. This will contrast with what happens in an experience of merely *imagining* water. (I have chosen the example of crows because these conceptually unsophisticated creatures are hypothesized to be able to imagine things.<sup>41</sup>) A thirsty crow who imagines water will not be disposed to approach the location of the imagined water and drink. And if she wants to manipulate “the” water, she will not be disposed to fly down and interact with it; she will be disposed to *imagine* the water as splashing onto the floor. Functional facts such as these might *make it the case* that the crow’s imaginative sensory representations do not purport to present her with a mind-independent portion of water.

The current proposal also satisfies our second condition, the condition that the relevant kind of seeming should be able to occur (if only rarely) in a way that the subject cannot introspectively identify. For consider a conceptually sophisticated human subject. She might be highly *but imperfectly* reliable at identifying, by introspection alone, the functional role played by her sensory representations. Suppose that she really hears a ringing sound but takes it to be a mere ringing sensation. It might be that in and of itself, her sensory representations dispose her to treat the sound as mind-independent. At the same time, this disposition might be “canceled” by her background knowledge that faint ringing of this kind is very likely to be a mere sensation. The subject might then notice that, overall, she is not disposed to treat the sound as mind-independent. From this, she might *incorrectly* conclude, on the basis of introspection alone, that her experience is sensational rather than perceptual.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the proposal allows that a subject might sometimes be unable to discriminate perceptual experiences from imaginative ones.

Finally, the current proposal satisfies our third condition: we need not treat the property of seeming to present mind-independent objects as perception-dependent. Instead, the current proposal says that seeming to present mind-independent objects is purely a matter of deploying sensory representations that play the right functional role, where this role is characterized in a way that is neutral about whether the subject is perceiving. For instance, when the subject has a perceptual experience of water, the functional role of that experience is a matter of (for instance) being disposed to act as though there is mind-independent water in the relevant location.

While we are working with this illustrative toy theory, it is worth seeing, very briefly, how it can be used to evade the standard objections against the negative semantic view that I mentioned earlier.

The first objection was that the negative semantic view is incompatible with the existence of perceptual experiences of the impossible, such as Escher staircases or supersaturated red. The toy theory easily allows for such experiences: we need only say that subjects can deploy sensory representations of impossible objects and properties. This idea is plausible enough, since we can certainly represent what is impossible. The second objection was that if the negative semantic view were true, then a hallucination could not ground *positive* knowledge

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<sup>41</sup> See Bayern et al. (2018).

<sup>42</sup> Notice that, on this view, *seeming* (or *purporting*) to present mind-independent objects does not require concept-possession, but *introspectively* seeming to present such objects *does* require concept-possession.

about one's experience. The toy theory lets us say that a hallucination can ground positive knowledge about one's experience insofar as that experience has a positive nature: it is a perceptual representation of a certain kind. The third objection was that the negative semantic view falsely predicts that a zombie could (consciously) hallucinate. The advocate of the toy theory can avoid this result by saying that any sensory representation that has the functional role in question is *thereby* conscious, so a zombie – which by definition lacks consciousness – could not deploy such a representation. The fourth and final objection was that the very notion of impersonal introspective indiscriminability is problematic. This objection obviously has no bite against the toy theory, which does not require such a notion.

Thus the toy theory provides us with one initially viable theoretical option. I repeat, however, that I am not committing to this way of filling out the presentational semantic view.<sup>43</sup>

Next I want to consider some objections to the presentational semantic view.

## 8. Objections and replies

*First objection.* You might worry that the presentational semantic view is not really a version of the positive semantic view. You might think that it is just Martin's own view, clothed in different language. Martin's view, recall, is this:

The *negative semantic view*: The concept of a perceptual experience is just the concept of something that is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception.

And you might think that something is impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception just in case it seems to present mind-independent objects.<sup>44</sup>

However, even if this last claim is correct, the proper conclusion would only be that the negative semantic view and the presentational semantic view are *extensionally* identical. These two views are certainly not identical *simpliciter*, for there are at least two crucial *intensional* differences between them. First, Martin's negative semantic view relies on a notion of impersonal introspective indiscriminability. The presentational semantic view does not. Second, and perhaps more fundamentally, the presentational semantic view entails that if perceptual experiences exist, then they all share a property – the property of seeming to present mind-independent objects – whose essence is not to be characterized in terms of perception. By contrast, Martin's view, as he rightly emphasizes, does not entail that there is any such property.

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<sup>43</sup> For the record, I am not just being coy here: I am not a representationalist. I prefer a pluralist theory of perception, one that blends certain elements of naïve realism and representationalism. See Mehta (ms).

<sup>44</sup> Some would reject this last claim. For instance, some will think that veridical perceptions do not seem to present *mind-independent* objects, but just objects, *simpliciter*. I discuss this idea in more detail in fn. 40.

*Second objection.* The presentational semantic view appeals to the property of seeming to present mind-independent objects. It says that this property is not perception-dependent; that is, its essence is not to be characterized in terms of perception. But you might think that this is obviously wrong: surely what it is to seem to present mind-independent objects is just to seem to be a *perception!*<sup>45</sup>

I reply that this is much too fast. Yes, I grant the biconditional claim that something seems to present mind-independent objects *just in case* it seems to be a perception. And, yes, *one* way to explain the truth of this biconditional is to say that *what it is* to seem to present mind-independent objects is just to seem to be a perception. But it is also possible to do things the other way around: to explain the truth of the biconditional by characterizing the essence of perception in terms of seeming presentation.

For instance, we might say that what it is to be a perception is to *correctly* seem to present mind-independent objects.<sup>46</sup> This fits nicely with a commitment of the presentational semantic view: that what it is to be a perceptual experience is to seem to present mind-independent objects. And, indeed, we might color in the picture further by saying that what it is to be a sensation is to seem to present mind-*dependent* objects. Finally, if we wish, we may go on to characterize the essence of seeming presentation in terms of some further property, such as a representational property.<sup>47,48</sup>

To press the current objection home, my opponent must rule out this alternative explanatory strategy. I leave an open invitation for her to do so.

## 9. Significance

Our framing question has been: what is the concept of perceptual experience?

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<sup>45</sup> This is not quite right, since it is possible to hallucinate an impossible object such as an Escher staircase. But, borrowing an idea from Martin (2004, pp. 80-81), the objection could be reformulated into something like this: surely what it is to seem to present mind-independent objects is just to be *exhaustively decomposable into parts* that each seem to be perceptions. I will ignore this nuance in what follows.

<sup>46</sup> This seeming is not introspective, so we can still allow that a perception might *introspectively* seem to present mind-*dependent* objects. Again, this is one way to understand the case in which the subject mistakes a perception of a faint ringing sound for a ringing sensation.

<sup>47</sup> It is worth mentioning an alternative approach. We might say that what it is to be a perceptual experience is to seem to present *external* (rather than mind-dependent) objects (see fn. 40); that what it is to be a perception is *in fact* to present external objects; and that what it is to be a sensation is *in fact* to present internal objects. Perhaps hallucinations are a subclass of sensations – the ones that in fact present internal objects but *seem* to present external objects. This approach can allow that some perceptions present, and correctly seem to present, objects that are external but mind-dependent. So this approach lets us reject the biconditional claim that something seems to present mind-independent objects *just in case* it seems to be a perception. The approach can also allow us to say that perceptions and sensations can be introspectively mistaken for one another, since the seemings invoked in the account are not introspective.

<sup>48</sup> Some experiences might seem to present mind-independent objects *and* mind-dependent ones. How would I account for these? I would say that they are mixtures of perceptual experiences and sensations. (It is not surprising to posit mixed experiences. It is for instance entirely possible to mix perceptual experiences and imaginative ones, by imagining coffee in a cup that I see to be empty.) However, another option is to say that it is possible to *perceive*, in an unmixed way, mind-independent objects and mind-dependent ones, as long as all of these objects are external. See fns. 40 and 47 for a way to develop this idea.

We started our investigations by considering Michael Martin's complex argument that the negative semantic view should be our default view – but we saw that this argument contains at least two serious flaws. This leaves the negative semantic view unsupported.

This conclusion is already a significant one, for several reasons. For Martin has gone on to argue that if the negative semantic view is true, then metaphysical disjunctivism should be our default view; the burden of proof would be on the common kind theorist to dislodge us from this default position. By blocking the argument for the negative semantic view, I have also blocked this particular argument that metaphysical disjunctivism should be our default view.

To say that the negative semantic view is currently unsupported is not to say that it is false. But, since I myself am impressed by the objections that have independently been raised against the negative semantic view, I proposed that we develop an alternative theory – the presentational semantic view. Still, the presentational semantic view is just a view about the *concept* of perceptual experience. Why does this view matter, if it is the *metaphysics* of perceptual experience that we are really interested in? I answer that the presentational semantic view would support two important metaphysical conclusions.

To see what the first important metaphysical conclusion is, remember that either a veridical perception or a matching hallucination will tend to cause similar actions and beliefs. Why so? Many metaphysical disjunctivists want to give a two-part answer. First, they want to explain why veridical perceptions tend to cause certain actions and beliefs. Second, they want to say that what it is to be a matching hallucination is just to be impersonally introspectively indiscriminable from a veridical perception;<sup>49</sup> thus, matching hallucinations tend to result in similar effects. For instance, suppose that James is afraid of spiders, so he will shriek if he veridically perceives one. Then, if he finds himself in a situation that cannot be introspectively discriminated from a veridical perception of a spider, he will take himself to be seeing a spider, and will respond in the same way – by shrieking.<sup>50</sup>

However, this view treats matching hallucinations as perception-dependent, i.e., it characterizes the nature of matching hallucinations in terms of veridical perceptions. But the presentational semantic view entails that matching hallucinations are not perception-dependent. Thus, the presentational semantic view rules out a commitment held by many metaphysical disjunctivists. That is not to say that the presentational semantic view rules out metaphysical disjunctivism itself. But there is an explanatory lacuna here, at least for those metaphysical disjunctivists who think that matching hallucinations are perception-dependent: it remains to be explained why either a veridical perception or a matching hallucination will tend to cause similar actions and beliefs.<sup>51</sup>

And there is a second metaphysical conclusion that the presentational semantic view would support. For, given that perceptual experiences exist, this view entails that there is a property *E* that is experience-grounding *and that is not perception-dependent*. Especially given the italicized phrase – given that the essence

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<sup>49</sup> See Martin (2004, p. 71).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, pp. 68-70.

<sup>51</sup> For other metaphysical disjunctivist attempts to fill this lacuna, see Alston (1999, p. 191); Fish (2009, p. 94); Allen (2015).



of *E* is not to be characterized in terms of perception – it is plausible that property *E* is a property that carves nature at its joints, so to speak. The idea is that *E* is not like, say, the arbitrary property of being grue. Instead, *E* is a *reasonably natural property*; equivalently, that there is a single *natural kind*, characterized by *E*, that includes all and only perceptual experiences.<sup>52</sup> This metaphysical conclusion would be interesting in its own right.

That said, I want to emphasize that even this second metaphysical conclusion does not entail the common kind theory. After all, even if there is a single natural kind that includes all and only perceptual experiences, that natural kind does not have to be the *fundamental* kind of every perceptual experience. However, although the second metaphysical conclusion does not entail the common kind theory, it should at least encourage us to investigate a particular version of the common kind theory: the theory that the property of seeming to present mind-independent objects – or some other common property that grounds it, such as a representational property – determines the fundamental kind of any perceptual experience. My thought is that the presentational semantic theory *better coheres* with this version of the common kind theory than it does with standard versions of metaphysical disjunctivism. Insofar as coherence is a theoretical virtue, that is some evidence for this version of the common kind theory. However, I emphasize that I take this advantage to be modest. The more significant result is that a particular argument for metaphysical disjunctivism is blocked.

These results are enough! We should not expect an investigation into a concept, by itself, to answer all of our metaphysical questions about the referent of that concept. I am satisfied if we have a much clearer sense of what we are looking for, and some solid clues for where to start our search.

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<sup>52</sup> I use the terms *reasonably natural property* and *natural kind* in the sense of Lewis (1983).

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