

# Against phenomenal particularism: The missing overlap argument

We bear all sorts of epistemic relations to the world. But there is one epistemic relation to the world, the relation that we bear towards the phenomenal character of experience, that provides us with knowledge of a particularly intimate and immediate sort. It is for this reason that it is so important to determine which portions of the world figure in phenomenal character and which do not.

Here I defend two central theses about phenomenal character. My first central thesis is that phenomenal particularism – roughly, the view that phenomenal character at least sometimes includes particulars – is false (§1-§4). My argument for this first thesis will leave us with several explanatory lacunae, however. Phenomenal particularism is a well-motivated view on account of its ability to explain the semantic, epistemic, introspective, and metaphysical roles of perceived particulars, and once this view is unseated we must find another theory to pick up the explanatory reins. In addition, my argument against phenomenal particularism will reveal certain sharp limitations in our epistemic access to particulars but no corresponding limitations in our epistemic access to properties and relations. This asymmetry, too, requires explanation.

That brings me to my second central thesis: I argue that **universalism** – roughly, the view that phenomenal character includes only properties and relations – can do all of this explanatory work. The universalist's key move is to posit two distinct epistemic relations involved in perceptual experience: an acquaintance relation that reveals to us the nature of

phenomenal properties and relations, and a mere tracking relation that gives us much more limited epistemic access to non-phenomenal particulars (§5).<sup>1</sup>

## 1. What is phenomenal particularism?

As I see it, the debate between the phenomenal particularist and the phenomenal generalist is best understood against the backdrop of two assumptions.

First is the assumption of an **act-object approach** to experience. According to the act-object approach, to have a phenomenal experience is to stand in a distinctive relation to one or more components that together make up what it's like to have the experience.<sup>2</sup> I will refer to the relation as **presentation**, to the components as **phenomenal elements**, and to what it's like to have the experience as the **phenomenal character** of the experience. When a subject has a visual experience of a red triangle, for example, I take it that she stands in a relation of presentation to phenomenal elements such as phenomenal redness and phenomenal triangularity that together make up the phenomenal character of her experience of the red triangle.

The assumption of an act-object approach to experience leaves open the metaphysical nature of phenomenal elements: these may include **features** (i.e., properties or relations), feature-instantiations, objects, events, states, etc. The assumption also leaves open the precise

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is in many ways a sequel to Neil Mehta's paper "The limited role of particulars in phenomenal experience" (2014), which also argues against phenomenal particularism. Mehta's central argument has been subjected to many criticisms – see French and Gomes (2016) and (ms) and Morgan (2016) – and the criticisms that I regard as most serious have been overlooked by Mehta and his opponents alike. Taking all of these criticisms into account, here I will simply offer the argument that I believe Mehta should have given all along. See fn. 8 for a comparison of my argument with Mehta's original argument.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term "entity" as a broad sortal that includes features, feature-instantiations, objects, events, and states.

nature of the relation that phenomenal elements bear towards phenomenal character: the relation may be one of constitution, parthood, etc. Moreover, the assumption is compatible with the claim that the presentation relation has further relata besides just the subject and the phenomenal elements. These further relata might include the subject's perspective, the sensory modality of the experience, and the environmental conditions. One might hold that these further relata, while not components of phenomenal character, still help to determine the phenomenal character of the experience in some other way.<sup>3,4</sup>

The second assumption needed to help frame the dispute between the phenomenal particularist and the phenomenal generalist is **strong externalism** about phenomenal elements. Strong externalism runs contrary to historical orthodoxy but has received much defense and development in recent decades. Strong externalism is the view that for any full perceptual experience, each phenomenal element presented in that experience either is instantiated in some perceived entity, if the element is a feature, or is just identical to some perceived entity, if the element is an object, feature-instantiation, event, or state.<sup>5</sup> Here a **full perceptual experience**

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<sup>3</sup> Logue (2012) develops such a view.

<sup>4</sup> My assumption that there is a single relation of presentation may appear to rule out certain "disjunctivist" views on which there are multiple such relations. For example, a disjunctivist might suggest that there is one presentation relation associated with full perceptual experiences and some quite different presentation relation associated with hallucinatory experiences. (Perhaps Martin (2006) could be read in this way.)

In fact, however, my assumption does not rule out this form of disjunctivism; it just requires us to express it differently. In particular, while we could still call the relation associated with full perceptual experiences "presentation," and we would need to coin a new name for the relation associated with hallucinatory experiences. Similarly, my assumption does not rule out the possibility that the relation of presentation has distinct sub-kinds. Perhaps seeing, hearing, and touching are all varieties of presentation; but if so we should identify *perceiving* as the presentation relation itself.

<sup>5</sup> I defend something much like strong externalism in [Author's Work A], though the text contains a statement of the view that I have refined with the help of [acknowledgment removed]. Strong externalism should not be confused with **phenomenal externalism**, the view that two intrinsically identical subjects might have experiences that differ in phenomenal character; strong externalism does not entail phenomenal externalism, nor does phenomenal externalism entail strong externalism. Again, see [Author's Work A].

is to be understood as the kind of perceptual experience implicated in genuine, successful perception; full perceptual experiences are to be contrasted with hallucinatory experiences (and perhaps also with illusory experiences, depending on how one thinks of these). Strong externalism says nothing about the phenomenal elements associated with hallucinatory (and perhaps illusory) experiences, nor does it say anything about the phenomenal elements associated with non-perceptual experiences such as imaginative experiences.

It is against the backdrop of these two assumptions – the assumption of the act-object approach and the assumption of strong externalism about phenomenal character – that I understand the debate between the phenomenal particularist and the phenomenal generalist:

**Phenomenal particularism:** External particulars (such as external objects, events, states, and feature-instantiations) are sometimes phenomenal elements.<sup>6</sup>

**Phenomenal generalism:** External particulars are never phenomenal elements.<sup>7</sup>

For brevity, I will henceforth drop the word “external” and just speak of *particulars*. Suppose for instance that I visually inspect some Merlot as I swirl it in my wine glass; I have a corresponding full perceptual experience. The phenomenal particularist might say that the phenomenal elements of my experience include the Merlot itself and its particular instantiations of deep red, while the phenomenal generalist might say that the phenomenal

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<sup>6</sup> Recent articulations of phenomenal particularism can be found in Campbell (2002), Martin (2004) and (2006), Sturgeon (2008), Fish (2009), Brewer (2011), Nanay (2012), Genone (2014), and Gomes (forthcoming). Some theorists who are aptly described as phenomenal particularists reject some of my framing assumptions (see fn. 4). I suspect that the central argument of this paper can be generalized to undermine such views, but I will not make that generalization here.

<sup>7</sup> Recent articulations of phenomenal generalism can be found in Chalmers (2006), Tye (2009), Pautz (2009), Siegel (2010, ch. 6), Millar (2014), Mehta (2014), and Schellenberg (forthcoming).

elements of my experience include only features, such as the feature of being deep red. It is phenomenal particularism that is the view under fire in this paper.

Phenomenal particularism and phenomenal generalism are views about *phenomenal elements*. They are not views about *presentation* – which, again, is the relation in which we stand to phenomenal elements. Now, phenomenal particularists commonly hold that presentation is a non-representational relation, while phenomenal generalists commonly hold that presentation is a representational relation, but the dispute between the phenomenal particularist and the phenomenal generalist is logically independent of this dispute between representationalists and non-representationalists. Indeed, near the end of this paper I will emphasize the explanatory virtues of universalism, which is a non-representationalist version of phenomenal generalism. I therefore reiterate that the target of my attack is phenomenal particularism, and phenomenal particularism alone.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Against unified phenomenal particularism, part 1

Return to the case in which I visually inspect some Merlot as I swirl it in my glass. Because I have a corresponding full perceptual experience, I am in a position to think and talk about the Merlot (**semantic particularity**), and indeed to know certain facts about it (**epistemic particularity**). When I introspect, I can attend among other things to the Merlot, for in some sense my experience makes it available to me (**introspective particularity**). In addition, while having that experience, I am perceiving the Merlot itself; so plausibly the Merlot bears some intimate metaphysical relation to the experience (**metaphysical particularity**). Notice that

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<sup>8</sup> Morgan (2016) says that Mehta (2014) targets “a specific version of phenomenal particularism – a version commonly known as naïve realism.” I believe that this is not a correct characterization of Mehta (2014), but in any case let it be clear that it is not a correct characterization of my argument here.

each of these expressions of particularity involves *that particular wine*, not just some wine or other. For example, my experience does put me in a position to know that there exists some deep red wine, but it also puts me in a position to know that *that very wine* is deep red.

Though I just drew attention to considerations about an experience associated with perceiving a particular *object*, there are perfectly parallel considerations pertaining to experiences associated with any particulars that we can perceive, including particular *feature instantiations, events, and states*. My visual experience of the Merlot may just as well put me in a position to think and know about the particular instantiation of deep red, the particular event of the wine's swirling in the glass, or the particular state of the wine's resting in the glass. I can attend to each when I introspect my experience, and each presumably stands in some intimate metaphysical relationship to my experience.

What explains these marks left by the particulars that we perceive? Because we find that the same four marks can be left by any perceived particular, regardless of its ontic category, it is natural to offer the same explanation across the board. That is what the **unified phenomenal particularist** does: she says that any perceived particular that generates all of the symptoms of particularity – whether the particular is an object, a feature-instantiation, an event, or a state – is a phenomenal element. The unified phenomenal particularist can then say that a perceived particular generates the symptoms of particularity *because* the perceived particular is a phenomenal element.

Unified phenomenal particularism is my first target; I will consider all other forms of phenomenal particularism later. My argument against unified phenomenal particularism begins with an embellishment of our earlier example. Suppose that while I am at a dinner party, the host pours me a glass of Merlot. I inspect the wine as I swirl it in my glass and then set it aside to let it breathe. Soon afterwards, while we are all blindfolded for a party game, another guest

spills the Merlot from my glass onto my lap, and I have a corresponding tactile experience.

With this case in mind, I will defend:

### The **Missing Overlap Argument**

- (1) If unified phenomenal particularism is true, then there must be a certain phenomenal overlap – in particular, the Merlot itself must be a phenomenal element common to my full visual experience of it in my glass and my full tactile experience of it on my lap. (Premise.)
- (2) If there is such a phenomenal overlap, then either (i) I can introspectively identify this phenomenal overlap, or (ii) I cannot introspectively identify this phenomenal overlap, and there is a principled explanation of this inability. (Premise.)
- (3) I cannot introspectively identify this phenomenal overlap. (Premise.)
- (4) There is no principled explanation of my inability to introspectively identify this phenomenal overlap. (Premise.)

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Therefore, unified phenomenal particularism is false. (Follows from (1), (2), (3), and (4).)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I understand Mehta (2014) as presenting this much simpler argument:

- (1\*) If phenomenal particularism is true, then there must be a certain phenomenal overlap – in particular, the Merlot itself must be a phenomenal element common to my full visual experience of it in my glass and my full tactile experience of it on my lap. (Premise.)
- (2\*) There is no such overlap. (Premise.)

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Therefore, phenomenal particularism is false. (Follows from (1\*) and (2\*).)

I have revised Mehta's original argument in two major ways. First, Mehta takes (2\*) as obviously true, but I believe that (2\*) deserves substantial defense; hence my inclusion of premises (2)-(4). We will see that premise (4), in particular, is far from trivial. Second, I believe that even the revised argument leaves one version of phenomenal particularism standing: the

The first three premises should be uncontroversial once they are properly understood; it is only the fourth premise that should generate any controversy. Let us see why.

The first premise does not say that if unified phenomenal particularism is true, then the phenomenal character associated with my seeing the Merlot must be *identical* to the phenomenal character associated with my feeling it spill on my lap. The first premise says something much weaker: that if unified phenomenal particularism is true, then there is *at least one phenomenal element* – the Merlot – shared by these two experiences. Those two experiences might still differ with respect to many other phenomenal elements.<sup>10</sup>

The first premise also does not just say that if unified phenomenal particularism is true, then the two specified experiences are *phenomenally similar* in some respect. It says something stronger: that they have an *identical phenomenal element*. Compare the phenomenal character associated with seeing something red and the phenomenal character associated with seeing something orange. Arguably, these phenomenal characters are similar but do not have any identical phenomenal elements. In general, phenomenal overlap – identity with respect to some phenomenal element – entails phenomenal similarity in some respect but not vice-versa. The first premise makes a claim about phenomenal overlap.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the first premise discusses a pair of *full* experiences, experiences associated with genuine, successful perception. We may further stipulate that the subject is also epistemically ideal in certain respects – that the subject is awake, alert, attentive, and so on.

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view that feature-instantiations, but no other particulars, are phenomenal elements. I therefore offer a separate argument against this view in §4.

<sup>10</sup> French and Gomes (2016, p. 457) misunderstand the argument of Mehta (2014) in this way. See Mehta and Ganson (2016).

<sup>11</sup> French and Gomes sometimes conflate phenomenal similarity with having an identical phenomenal element or “aspect” (e.g., French and Gomes (ms, p. 4)). Also, the first premise also does not just say that there is *some phenomenal overlap or other* between the two experiences, contra Morgan (2016, §3.2). The first premise says that the two experiences phenomenally overlap *with respect to the Merlot*.



With these clarifications in place, we can appreciate the truth of the first premise: the premise that if unified phenomenal particularism is true, then there must be a certain phenomenal overlap – in particular, the Merlot itself must be a phenomenal element common to my full visual experience of it in my glass and my full tactile experience of it on my lap. This premise just encodes a straightforward commitment of unified phenomenal particularism. For unified phenomenal particularism is the view that any perceived particular that generates all four symptoms of particularity is a phenomenal particular, and the Merlot is a perceived particular that generates all four symptoms of particularity.

On to the second premise, then, which says that if there is such a phenomenal overlap, then either (i) I can introspectively identify this phenomenal overlap, or (ii) I cannot introspectively identify this phenomenal overlap, and there is a principled explanation of this inability. This premise does nothing more than rule out the possibility that (iii) I cannot introspectively identify this phenomenal overlap, *and* there is no principled explanation for this inability. Of course we should rule out this possibility. Introspection puts the subject in a position to know certain facts and not others about the phenomenal character of her experiences. There are highly systematic patterns concerning which facts about phenomenal character a subject can know on the basis of introspection and which she cannot, and it is simply not credible that such patterns are impervious to further explanation.<sup>12</sup>

Next consider the third premise, which states that I cannot introspectively identify any such phenomenal overlap. For comparison, take a prime candidate for a case in which the subject *can* introspectively identify a particular that is a phenomenal element shared by two distinct experiences. Suppose that Caroline is trekking through a rainforest. She looks to her

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<sup>12</sup> On this point I mean to press French and Gomes (2016): they say that introspection fails in the Merlot case, but they offer no explanation for why this is so. An explanation is owed.

left and notices a parrot pecking at some nuts scattered on the ground; she has a full visual experience of the parrot. The parrot then flies out of view for a moment before landing heavily on Caroline's right shoulder. Caroline is still looking to her left and so no longer sees the parrot; her full perceptual experience of the parrot is now purely tactile.

It might well seem to Caroline as though it is *one* parrot that she experiences first through vision and then through touch – that it is one parrot that she initially sees feeding on nuts and the very same parrot that she later feels adjusting its perch on her shoulder. The unified phenomenal particularist will regard the parrot as a phenomenal element of Caroline's two experiences, and so the unified phenomenal particularist may treat this as a paradigm of a case in which a subject can introspectively identify a phenomenal overlap between distinct experiences. To be clear, even in this case I believe that there is no such phenomenal overlap, and that there should not even *appear* to be such a phenomenal overlap once the subject learns to distinguish the phenomenal from the merely introspectible. I will develop these ideas in due course. But for now we may use the example to understand what it might be like, according to the unified phenomenal particularist, to be able to introspectively identify a phenomenal overlap.

It should be uncontroversial that in the Merlot case I lack this introspective ability. When I feel the Merlot as it spills onto my lap, I may have no idea that it is the same Merlot that I saw swirling in my glass a moment ago. I can introspect as much as I like, with full attention, a clear mind, and a fine memory – I will make no progress towards identifying the tepid liquid on my lap with the Merlot that was recently in my glass. For all I know, and for all I can know through full exercise of my introspective capacities, my lap may be soaked with water from the glass on my left or Bordeaux from the glass on my right. That is all that the third premise claims.

As I have said, the first three premises of the Missing Overlap Argument should be uncontroversial. It is only the fourth premise that requires a substantial defense.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Against unified phenomenal particularism, part 2

The fourth premise of the Missing Overlap Argument states that there is no principled explanation of my inability to introspectively identify the putative phenomenal overlap in my two experiences of the Merlot. What kind of explanation might the unified phenomenal particularist provide?

According to the unified phenomenal particularist, any full perceptual experience of a particular consists of the following: the *subject* and her *background mental situation*; the *particular* that is a phenomenal element of the experience; perhaps certain *further relata* of the presentation relation; and the *relation of presentation* that connects these relata. Presumably, then, the unified phenomenal particularist will explain facts about introspective unknowability by appeal to one or more of these factors. But in this section I will examine these factors systematically and show that none of them can figure in a good explanation of my inability to identify the Merlot as a phenomenal element common to my visual and tactile experiences.

*The subject and her background mental situation.* Any theorist can agree that a fact about phenomenal character might be introspectively unknowable if the subject is less than epistemically ideal. However, we have already stipulated that the Merlot case is not like that – we have stipulated that I am awake, alert, attentive, in possession of a fine memory, and so forth. So the unified phenomenal particularist must look elsewhere for her explanation.

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<sup>13</sup> My central complaint against Mehta (2014) is that he overlooks the need for such a defense. Surprisingly, so do his critics.

A better explanation is that the subject of the Merlot case lacks relevant background knowledge. It will prove useful to postpone discussion of this explanation until the end of the section, however.

*The particular that is a phenomenal element of the experience.* The unified phenomenal particularist may next suggest that I am unable to re-identify the Merlot because between my two experiences the Merlot has changed in some relevant respect, such as its shape. But this cannot be right. For imagine that I instead see something rigid – a fork, perhaps. And suppose that I am then told to touch the handles of various pieces of cutlery, where those handles are of precisely the same shape, material, density, etc. of the fork that I just saw. I will be just as incapable of re-identifying the fork under these circumstances, even though its shape does not change.

*Further relata of the presentation relation.* The unified phenomenal particularist need not think of presentation as merely a two-place relation between the subject and any phenomenal elements; she may instead hold that there are any number of further relata, such as the subject's perspective, the sensory modality of the experience, and the environmental conditions. Let us refer to these putative additional relata as **phenomenal circumstances**. Perhaps the idea is to conceive of these further relata as metaphysical **background conditions** for the phenomenal elements to make up phenomenal character.<sup>14</sup> Think of the way that the history of some particular chunks of wood might be a background condition for those chunks of wood to make up a table, even though the history of those chunks of wood is not a *component* of the table. Regardless of exactly how phenomenal circumstances are best understood, however, the unified

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<sup>14</sup> I take this language from Schroeder (2007, ch. 2).

phenomenal particularist may try to explain my inability to identify the phenomenal overlap by appealing to differences in phenomenal circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

It is a point in my opponent's favor that many candidate phenomenal circumstances are not constant across my two experiences of the Merlot. My two experiences belong to different modalities, involve different perspectives on the wine, etc. But I say that a unified phenomenal particularist who appeals to phenomenal circumstances in this way faces a dilemma.

She may grasp the first horn of the dilemma by claiming that I cannot identify a phenomenal overlap *because there is no overlap*: somehow, the differences in phenomenal circumstances make it the case that this very Merlot fails to be a phenomenal element in at least one of my two experiences. This response is a non-starter, for it denies the first premise of the Missing Overlap Argument. According to that premise, if unified phenomenal particularism is true, then Merlot itself must be a phenomenal element common to my full visual experience of it in my glass and my full tactile experience of it on my lap. This premise is indisputable, as we saw in the previous section. To repeat the point briefly: the Merlot is a perceived particular that generates all of the symptoms of particularity, and unified phenomenal particularism is just the view that any perceived particular that generates all of the symptoms of particularity is a phenomenal element.

The unified phenomenal particularist may instead grasp the second horn of the dilemma by claiming that the experiences do phenomenally overlap with respect to the Merlot, but because of the differences in phenomenal circumstances, *I cannot recognize the overlap*. Yet now the appeal to differences in phenomenal circumstances explains the wrong datum. The appeal

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<sup>15</sup> French and Gomes (2016, pp. 457–459) and (ms) appeal to something like this idea in an assault on premise (1), but I believe that it is much more aptly used here, i.e., in an assault on premise (4). As French and Gomes note, appeal to circumstances has been advanced by many phenomenal particularists, including Campbell (2011) and Brewer (2011).

might explain *my ability to recognize certain phenomenal differences*, for if phenomenal circumstances help determine phenomenal character, then differences in phenomenal circumstances might generate further differences in phenomenal character that I might then recognize. But what needs explaining is *my inability to recognize a phenomenal overlap*, given that (as the unified phenomenal particularist is now conceding) there is a phenomenal overlap. If one and the same Merlot is a phenomenal element of both experiences, then it is beside the point that there are *further* entities generating *further* phenomenal differences.<sup>16</sup>

So the unified phenomenal particularist makes no explanatory progress by appealing to phenomenal circumstances.

*The relation of presentation.* The unified phenomenal particularist may next propose that at least one of my experiences of the Merlot – my visual experience of the Merlot or my tactile experience of the Merlot – involves a defective relation of presentation. To be precise, she may need to speak of “experiences” to allow that such mental occurrences might have no phenomenal character, and likewise she may need to speak of defective relations of “presentation.” But I will drop the scare-quotes to make for an easier read.

On the one hand, the unified phenomenal particularist may suggest that one of my experiences of the Merlot is defective *because it does not present the Merlot at all*. For comparison, suppose that I have a hallucinatory experience such that it incorrectly seems to me that I am hearing the barking of my dog. The unified phenomenal particularist may say that my experience does not present me with barking of any kind, though I may form a false belief to the contrary based on introspection. Of course, the unified phenomenal particularist still owes an explanation of why I might form this false belief, but she has many possible explanations in

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<sup>16</sup> These further phenomenal differences might be relevant were they to distract me from the alleged phenomenal overlap, but that is not what is happening: I have no trouble attending to the Merlot in both of my experiences.

reserve: for example, perhaps I am undergoing a burst of neural activity that is internally identical to a burst of neural activity that I would typically undergo when I really do hear the barking of my dog.

On the other hand, the unified phenomenal particularist may suggest that one of my experiences of the Merlot is defective *because it presents me with the Merlot in some epistemically degraded way*. For comparison, suppose that I am looking through a narrow window. I see something zoom through my narrow field of view from left to right, and then I see something zoom through my narrow field of view from right to left. Even if what I saw was in fact a single Frisbee being hurled back and forth at speed, I might be unable to recognize this fact through introspection alone. The unified phenomenal particularist might say by way of explanation that my experience presents me with the Frisbee, but only in a degraded sense: the Frisbee was moving too fast for me to fully “lock onto” it.

Yet no appeal to missing or degraded relations of presentation will help in the Merlot case. For both of the experiences at issue in this case involve relations of presentation that are *paradigmatically* non-defective with respect to that particular Merlot. I have no trouble locking onto *that liquid* in each of my two experiences, and each of these experiences is richly detailed with respect to the Merlot. So each experience clearly presents the Merlot in a non-degraded sense.

But the unified phenomenal particularist has one final option, which is to admit that both of my experiences involve full-fledged presentation of the Merlot, but to add that *in general* the relation of presentation is not epistemically robust. Rather, the unified phenomenal particularist may say, presentation is merely a **tracking** relation: a relation such that an epistemically ideal subject’s standing in it to some entity *E* on distinct occasions *never, by itself*, puts the subject in a position to re-identify *E*.

The unified phenomenal particularist's claim is *not* that being presented with a phenomenal element never puts the subject in a position to re-identify the phenomenal element *at all*. For it is obvious that a subject can sometimes re-identify a (putative) phenomenal particular. Recall Caroline, for example, who can re-identify the thing that has just landed on her shoulder as the parrot she saw a moment earlier. The unified phenomenal particularist's claim is rather that being presented with some entity *E* never *by itself* puts the subject in a position to re-identify *E*; the subject always requires *background knowledge* to re-identify a phenomenal element presented in distinct experiences. Caroline, for example, knows at least implicitly that there is nothing nearby that could have landed on her shoulder other than the parrot, and only because she has this background knowledge can she re-identify the parrot. (Near the beginning of this section we encountered, but did not discuss, the possibility of appealing to background knowledge. It is because the appeal to background knowledge is so apt here that I have postponed discussion of this idea until now.)

Using this pair of explanatory resources – first, the idea that presentation is just tracking; second and consequently, the idea that background knowledge is always required to re-identify a phenomenal element presented in distinct experiences – the unified phenomenal particularist can explain my inability to re-identify the Merlot. For I lack the requisite background knowledge when I undergo my experiences of the Merlot. Indeed, I have *defeating* background knowledge: I know that there are many liquids that might have been spilled on my lap. Thus I am unable to recognize the Merlot as a phenomenal element shared between my visual and tactile experiences.

I regard this pair of ideas as my opponent's last, best explanatory hope. Each idea is initially promising, and indeed I believe that each idea contains a nugget of truth. But these ideas do violence to the epistemology. In particular, they cannot be squared with the



asymmetry between *perceived particulars*, which an epistemically ideal subject undergoing full perceptual experiences can *never* re-identify just on the basis of introspection without background knowledge, and *certain features*, which an epistemically ideal subject undergoing full perceptual experiences can *always* re-identify just on the basis of introspection without background knowledge.

Suppose, for example, that I am like the fabled vision scientist Mary; I have never experienced any colors before.<sup>17</sup> Suppose further that unlike Mary, I have no special scientific knowledge. I therefore lack concepts of colors, surface reflectances, etc. One day, I finally see something colored: a scarlet fire-engine. My full perceptual experience of the fire-engine will put me in a position to form a concept that in fact refers to the color scarlet (or at least to some experienced feature that is causally or metaphysically related to scarlet, though I will leave this qualification implicit below). And *introspection on this full perceptual experience alone, without background knowledge*, puts me in a position to recognize that feature whenever I have another full perceptual experience of it. Recall that we are assuming that I am epistemically ideal – attentive, in possession of a perfect memory, and so on. Then if I see an emerald, I will be in a position to know that I am not experiencing *that feature*, and if I see a cardinal with scarlet plumage, I will be in a position to know that I am again experiencing *that feature*.<sup>18</sup>

My claim is not that an epistemically ideal subject can re-identify *every* fully perceived feature on the basis of introspection alone. There are many features that an epistemically ideal

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<sup>17</sup> See Jackson (1982).

<sup>18</sup> Here I am repurposing an argument from Johnston (2004). The key difference is that Johnston's argument relies essentially on claims about our ability to learn about features purely on the basis of *hallucinatory* experiences. While I accept Johnston's argument, I worry that it may be dialectically ineffective: it relies on taking seriously intuitions that phenomenal particularists may not share, and even if they do share it they have shown a willingness to try to debunk our intuitions about the phenomenal character of hallucinatory experiences. My argument, by contrast, focuses only on full perceptual experiences and therefore avoids these concerns.

subject might fully perceive yet be unable to re-identify on the basis of introspection alone: think of a perceptible but complex three-dimensional shape which looks completely different from the front and from the back, leaving even an epistemically ideal subject unable to tell whether or not she is seeing the same shape from a different angle.<sup>19</sup> My claim is only that there are *certain* features that, if fully perceived by an epistemically ideal subject, can always be re-identified on the basis of introspection alone. We might call these **appearance features**. I claim that there is some appearance feature associated with my seeing scarlet for the first time, and for the sake of simplicity I am speaking as though that appearance feature is scarlet itself.

Now, recall that we are assuming the truth of strong externalism about phenomenal elements, according to which every phenomenal element presented in every full perceptual experience either is instantiated in some perceived entity (if the phenomenal element is a feature) or is just identical to some perceived entity. So we must think of appearance features as being instantiated in some perceived entity, rather than as being instantiated in the mind. But there are many theories about appearance features that are compatible with strong externalism, and we need not choose among them now.<sup>20</sup>

There is one further nuance about the case in which I see scarlet for the first time: even if I am epistemically ideal, perhaps I might still confuse the color scarlet with a color that is just barely different. Still, when I see something that is in fact scarlet, it will always seem to be the same color as the fire-engine that I saw. Moreover, by continuing to improve my introspective capacities, such as my memory and attention, and by continuing to improve my perceptual discriminatory capacities, such as the acuity of my vision, we can *arbitrarily* narrow the range of

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<sup>19</sup> The example is from Campbell (2011).

<sup>20</sup> Campbell (2011) worries that any reasonable theory of appearance features will force us to embrace idealism. But I offer one detailed and robustly realist theory of appearance features in [Author's Work B], and Hill (2009) offers another.

features that I cannot tell apart from scarlet.<sup>21</sup> Not so for particular bodies of wine, however. Having seen the Merlot in my glass, I will not always be able to tell that it is in fact the same object when I later feel it on my lap – and even if I see it again, I will not be able to tell it apart from a distinct portion of Merlot from the same bottle. Nor can we arbitrarily narrow the range of entities that I confuse with the Merlot just by continuing to improve my introspective capacities and my perceptual discriminatory capacities. In particular, I will never improve a whit at distinguishing two distinct but intrinsically identical portions of Merlot.

Here is my objection, then. The unified phenomenal particularist has tried to explain the subject's inability to identify a phenomenal overlap in the Merlot case by claiming that presentation is just a tracking relation, and that consequently a subject must have background knowledge to identify any phenomenal overlap. But it is not true that a subject must have background knowledge to identify any phenomenal overlap, and it is therefore not true that presentation is just a tracking relation. For having a full perceptual experience always puts an epistemically ideal subject in a position to re-identify certain phenomenal elements, namely appearance features, without relying on background knowledge. If presentation were just a tracking relation, then that would not be possible.

But the unified phenomenal particularist may feel uncooperative at this stage. She should concede that in full perceptual experience we stand in *some* relation to appearance features, but she may protest that this is not the relation of *presentation*. Her idea is that when I experience the scarlet fire-engine, I stand in some *other* epistemically robust relation to appearance features, while being *presented* only with particulars. I reply, however, that if experience involves an epistemically robust relation that we bear towards appearance features

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<sup>21</sup> As Schellenberg (forthcoming) notes.

and an epistemically fragile relation that we bear towards particulars, then it is obviously the epistemically robust relation that deserves to be called the relation of presentation.

The unified phenomenal particularist has run out of resources. She owes an explanation of the epistemically ideal subject's inability to identify a phenomenal overlap in the Merlot case, just on the basis of introspection and without background knowledge. But it is of no avail for her to appeal to facts about the *subject* and her *background mental situation*, facts about the putative *particular phenomenal element*, facts about further *circumstances*, or facts about the *relation of presentation*. And that exhausts her explanatory materials.

I conclude that the fourth and final premise of the Missing Overlap Argument is true. Thus, unified phenomenal particularism is false.

#### 4. Generalizing the argument

The Missing Overlap Argument shows that *one* particular, the Merlot, might leave all four marks of experiential particularity without being a phenomenal element. But the argument does not show that *no* particular is ever a phenomenal element, so it does not yet rule out phenomenal particularism *tout court*.

To be sure, the Missing Overlap Argument can readily be generalized to rule out many categories of putative particular phenomenal elements, for the basic argumentative strategy can be applied to any case in which the subject picks out the same particular via distinct features. It is easy to see how to generate structurally similar cases involving any object, event, or state, since in principle any object, event, or state can be picked out via distinct features. One can either see or feel the Merlot's swirling in the glass via distinct features of that event, for example, and one can either see or feel the Merlot's resting in a glass via distinct features of that state.

But there is one category of particulars to which this argumentative strategy cannot easily be applied, namely, *feature instantiations*.<sup>22</sup> To be sure, an epistemically ideal subject who is (putatively) presented with the same feature-instantiation across multiple full perceptual experiences need not be in a position to know that fact without relying on contextual clues or background knowledge. For example, if I am epistemically ideal and am presented with the same instantiation of deep red twice, I need not be in a position to know that I have seen the same instantiation twice rather than seeing two distinct instantiations of precisely the same shade of deep red.

Here, however, the phenomenal particularist can offer a plausible explanation of my epistemic incapacity. The explanation relies on a general claim about presentation: the claim that whenever I am presented with a feature-instantiation, I am aware of (i) the feature-instantiation itself, and (ii) what feature is being instantiated, but I am not aware of (iii) anything that distinguishes this feature-instantiation from other instantiations of precisely the same feature. Thus, the phenomenal particularist can say, an epistemically ideal subject who is fully perceiving will be able to distinguish instantiations of *different* features purely on the basis of introspection, but she will be unable to distinguish different instantiations of the *same* feature purely on the basis of introspection.

I regard this as a satisfactory explanation of the relevant epistemic incapacity. Thus, to rule out phenomenal particularism in general, I must rule out the **feature-instantiation view**: the view that feature-instantiations are the only particular phenomenal elements. Note that the feature-instantiation view leaves open whether there are any non-particular phenomenal elements, and if so what those might be. The feature-instantiation theorist can easily explain why the four marks of particularity arise for feature-instantiations; they arise because those

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<sup>22</sup> As Morgan (2016) astutely observes.

feature-instantiations are phenomenal elements. And presumably she will add that the four marks of particularity arise for objects, events, and states because we are presented with feature-instantiations of those objects, events, and states.<sup>23</sup>

My core objection is that if we accept the feature-instantiation view, then we must complicate our theory of experience metaphysically, and we must complicate our theory of experience explanatorily, but we get nothing back in the bargain.

If we accept the feature-instantiation view, then we must first complicate our theory metaphysically. For certain imaginative experiences plainly have phenomenal elements that are not feature-instantiations. Take for instance an experience in which I vividly imagine seeing a cobra, but no cobra in particular. There is something it's like for me to have such an experience. But this experience need not include any particular phenomenal elements, not even feature-instantiations. We can make the point especially clear by stipulating that I imagine the cobra as having a perceptible feature that just happens never to have been instantiated by any actual thing.

That such imaginative experiences have phenomenal character should be granted even by those who say that hallucinatory experiences have no phenomenal character, but merely seem to have phenomenal character. For the claim that hallucinatory experiences have no phenomenal character is plausible only because hallucinatory experiences are epistemically defective: when I hallucinate seeing a cobra, even if I know that I am hallucinating, it will seem to me that I am really seeing a cobra. By contrast, imaginative experiences need not be

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<sup>23</sup> Nanay (2012) suggests that perceptual experiences are representations of feature-instantiations, and are never representations of features. Though Nanay does not explicitly comment on phenomenal character, his view could naturally be developed into a form of the feature-instantiation theory.

epistemically defective at all: when I vividly imagine seeing a cobra, I need not feel the slightest temptation to believe that I am really seeing a cobra.

So the feature-instantiation theorist should say that at least the phenomenal character of at least some experiences includes both particulars – namely feature-instantiations – and non-particulars – features, perhaps. That leaves us with a complicated theory of the ontology of phenomenal elements.

Moreover, if we accept the feature-instantiation view, then we must also complicate our explanation of the particularity of experience. The four marks of particularity appear in a uniform way whether relevant particular is an object, event, state, or feature-instantiation. But the feature-instantiation theorist does not provide a uniform explanation of these four marks. She provides one explanation of the four marks of particularity regarding feature-instantiations: she says that these four marks arise because feature-instantiations are phenomenal elements. And she provides a second explanation of the four marks of particularity regarding objects, events, and states: she says that these four marks arise because objects, events, and states are suitably related to certain phenomenal elements, namely feature instantiations, even though the objects, events, and states are not themselves phenomenal elements.

Perhaps these complications would be acceptable if there were no better theory of experience on offer. But, as I will show in the next section, there is a better theory on offer: the **universalist** theory, which has all of the explanatory power of the feature-instantiation theory and none of the complications.

## 5. A universalist explanation

From the discussion so far, we can extract three clusters of data in need of explanation. First, we must explain semantic, epistemic, metaphysical, and introspective particularity, as described in §2. Second, we must explain the epistemically ideal subject's ability to re-identify certain fully perceived features solely via introspection and without background knowledge, and third we must explain the epistemically ideal subject's contrasting inability to re-identify any fully perceived particulars solely via introspection and without background knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

I will soon offer an explanation of these data via a phenomenal generalist theory that I will call **universalism**. But let me first pause to clarify the task of this section. The task is *not* to argue that universalism is correct; in particular, it is *not* to argue that universalism is any better than other versions of phenomenal generalism. The task is only to show that *some* form of phenomenal generalism is superior to *any* form of phenomenal particularism – superior, especially, to the feature-instantiation view – without worrying about which form of phenomenal generalism is the best.<sup>25</sup>

Universalism is a theory that comprises theses about appearance features and presentation, theses about particulars and tracking, and theses about conceptualization and introspection.

Regarding appearance features, the universalist says that these are the only phenomenal elements of any experience, whether perceptual or otherwise. The universalist adds that presentation is a relation of **acquaintance**: to be acquainted with something is to be aware of the very essence of what is presented. Here it is useful to compare universalism to representationalism: like many standard representationalist theories, universalism is a form of

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<sup>24</sup> There is of course much more to explain. For example, we might wonder how to sort experiences into kinds. See Mehta (2014, pp. 323–330) for discussion.

<sup>25</sup> In much previous work, I have defended representationalism (see [Author's Works B, C, and D]). But I now see the error of my ways; I have become a universalist. I say again, however, that this paper is not a defense of universalism.



phenomenal generalism, but unlike any representationalist theory, universalism treats presentation as a non-representational relation.

Next, regarding particulars, the universalist says that these are *non-phenomenal* elements of any full perceptual experience. She adds that we merely track these non-phenomenal elements rather than being acquainted with them. In any experience we are thus acquainted with phenomenal elements, which are all appearance features,<sup>26</sup> and in any full perceptual experience we also track non-phenomenal elements, which include any particulars that we perceive (and perhaps certain non-appearance features as well).<sup>27</sup>

Finally, regarding conceptualization, the universalist says that when a subject has an experience, she typically applies concepts to these presented appearance features and (in the case of perceptual experiences) to these tracked particulars. This application of concepts is distinctively experiential as opposed to, say, doxastic, but it is not a necessary feature of an experience: perhaps some non-human animals have experiences despite lacking concepts altogether. The universalist add that when the subject introspects, she has access to all of these elements – these conceptualized appearance features, particulars, and non-appearance features – in combination.<sup>28</sup>

So elaborated, universalism can explain the data. It can explain the particularity of experience by hijacking the phenomenal particularist's explanation, the only difference being

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<sup>26</sup> Mehta (2014, p. 320) points out an advantage of this approach in explaining the phenomenal character of imaginative experience. But cf. French and Gomes (ms, p. 8).

<sup>27</sup> I hold that only “thin” features are phenomenal elements of experience; I would treat so-called “thick” features, such as natural kind features, as non-phenomenal elements of perceptual experience. But I will not defend this suggestion here. See Siegel (2006) for a contrasting view.

<sup>28</sup> In offering this universalist theory I take inspiration from Johnston (2004). Our theories differ in two important respects, however. First, Johnston holds that there is a single relation in which we stand to both features and particulars, whereas I hold that there are two quite different relations here. Second, Johnston does not include any of the claims about concept application that I do.

that we must appeal to elements of experience that are non-phenomenal rather than phenomenal. But this difference will not undermine the explanation. For suppose that when I see the Merlot, it is itself an element of my experience, albeit a non-phenomenal one. Then since I experientially track the Merlot, of course I will be able to refer to it, per semantic particularity, and of course I will be in a position to know about it, per epistemic particularity. The theory has it that the subject has introspective access to the conceptualized particulars with their features, which is just a way of clarifying introspective particularity. And per metaphysical particularity, it is a posit of the theory that the Merlot will be an element, albeit a *non-phenomenal* one, of my experience.

The universalist can also explain why the epistemically ideal subject can always re-identify any fully perceived appearance feature solely via introspection and without background knowledge, even though she can never re-identify any fully perceived particular solely via introspection and without background knowledge. The explanation is that in full perceptual experience the subject is acquainted with appearance features, but the subject merely tracks any perceived particulars. Acquaintance reveals the essence of an entity. Thus, because experience reveals to us the essences of appearance features, it puts us in a position to re-identify those features purely on the basis of introspection and without background knowledge when we become re-acquainted with them later. In contrast, when we merely track a single particular on distinct occasions, we will never be able to re-identify it purely on the basis of introspection and without background knowledge, for we will not learn its essence on the basis of experience alone. Only by relying on background knowledge, which will usually be implicit, can we introspectively re-identify a particular tracked on separate occasions.

The universalist theory also explains why phenomenal particularism can seem so intuitive: we are apt to confuse the particularity of the *introspectible* for the particularity of the

*phenomenal*. But our theory distinguishes the two. It says that experience can make us aware of particulars, and that these particulars may be introspectively accessible; on both of these points, the theory agrees with standard versions of phenomenal particularism. But the theory adds that even in the best cases, not all that is introspectible must be phenomenal.<sup>29</sup>

In short, the universalist theory has all of the explanatory advantages of the feature-instantiation theory (and for that matter all of the explanatory advantages of unified phenomenal particularism) without any of its complications. Recall that the feature-instantiation theorist offers an ontically haphazard account of phenomenal elements: phenomenal elements include both particular feature-instantiations and non-particulars of some sort. The universalist replaces this mess with an ontically simple account of phenomenal elements: phenomenal elements include only features. Recall also that the feature-instantiation theorist offers a haphazard account of the four marks of particularity: these marks are generated by some phenomenal elements, namely feature-instantiations, and by some non-phenomenal elements, namely certain objects, states, and events suitably related to these feature-instantiations. The universalist replaces this mess with a simple account of the four marks of particularity: these marks are generated only by non-phenomenal elements, namely those particulars that we track in experience. All who prefer elegant explanations to haphazard ones should join me in rejecting the feature-instantiation theory.

The phenomenal particularist might make one final sally, however, for it may now seem that we have given her just the weapons that she needs to defend her view. Let her say exactly what the universalist has just said, with the small modification that particulars are still said to

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<sup>29</sup> Many phenomenal particularists say that they are motivated precisely by the idea that we can introspectively identify particulars. Indeed, several replies to Mehta (2014) have emphasized this motivation (French and Gomes (ms); Morgan (2016, end of §1)). But I have just shown that the universalist can capture this motivation just as well as the phenomenal particularist.

be phenomenal elements. In other words, let the phenomenal particularist agree that there is a relation of acquaintance, which we bear to appearance features, and a relation of tracking, which we bear to perceived particulars. But let her add that these are two different types of *presentational* relations, i.e., relations that we bear to phenomenal elements of experience.<sup>30</sup> The phenomenal particularist may then repurpose the universalist's explanatory apparatus to capture the differences between the particulars and the appearance features that, the phenomenal particularist now claims, *together* make up the phenomenal character of certain experiences.

If the phenomenal particularist makes this move, then I have no further quarrel with her. For in substance she has adopted precisely the theory that I hold. We both acknowledge an important demarcation between what is introspectible and what is not (or perhaps between what is introspectible *in some specified way* and what is not), and we agree that appearance features and perceived particulars fall together on the first side of this demarcation. We also both acknowledge an important demarcation between what the subject is acquainted with in experience and what the subject merely tracks in experience, and we agree that appearance features fall on the first side of this demarcation and that perceived particulars fall on the second side of this demarcation.

And how can I pursue an argument with someone who agrees with me?

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<sup>30</sup> This view rejects my assumption in §1 that there is a single presentation relation, but a discussion of the view will be instructive nevertheless.

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[Author's Work B]

[Author's Work C]

[Author's Work D]

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