

# The conceptual impossibility of phenomenal particularism

The last three decades of the twentieth century stood witness to major debates over the nature of **phenomenal character** – roughly, what it’s like to have an experience. There was a large cast of characters in this debate, including the adverbialist, the sense-datum theorist, the type physicalist, the functionalist, the representationalist, and the dualist.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, these theorists did not agree on much. But they did agree on one crucial point: they agreed that while there is a phenomenal difference between seeing something *red* and seeing something *green*, there is no phenomenal difference between seeing *this* red thing and seeing *that* distinct but intrinsically identical red thing. What it’s like to perceive is exhausted by what it’s like to perceive *properties and relations*; there is nothing further that it’s like to perceive *particulars, as such*.<sup>2</sup> And even in a desert of disagreement, this small oasis of agreement seemed secure.

But it was not. For the twenty-first century saw the rise of a new character in the debate, the *naïve realist*, who typically analyzes phenomenal character in terms of a special kind of awareness relation that the subject stands in to ordinary environmental particulars.<sup>3</sup> These naïve realists have in turn inspired representationalists of a new kind – representationalists who analyze phenomenal character in terms of representational contents that sometimes include ordinary environmental particulars.

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of these views are compatible with one another. For influential versions of: adverbialism, see Sellars (1975); the sense-datum theory, see Ayer (1956); type physicalism, see Smart (1959) and Block (1996); functionalism, see Lewis (1972); representationalism, see Dretske (1995), Tye (1995), and Lycan (1996); dualism, see Chalmers (1996).

<sup>2</sup> The point is made especially explicit in McGinn (1982), Davies (1992), and Tye (1995).

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps among other things – some naïve realists would add that an analysis of phenomenal character might also include perceived properties (see Martin (2002), (2004), and (2006)) and environmental/perspectival conditions (see Brewer (2011) and Campbell (2011)).

That is the nativity story of the view that I will call **phenomenal particularism** – roughly, the view that some *perceived particulars* figure in the phenomenal characters of perceptual experiences. Phenomenal particularism is a view that is shared by many naïve realists and by these new representationalists, and it is supposed to have many advantages – for example, it is supposed to allow for an elegant explanation of certain semantic, epistemic, and introspective features of perceptual experiences.<sup>4</sup> Largely for these reasons, phenomenal particularism has risen from obscurity to importance. In fact, in certain parts of the world, such as the United Kingdom, it is now the utterly dominant position. And if phenomenal particularism is correct, then there *is* a phenomenal difference between seeing this red thing and seeing that distinct but intrinsically identical red thing.

Phenomenal particularism is the target of this paper: whatever auxiliary advantages the view may have, I just cannot see how it can be right.<sup>5</sup> Here I offer a simple and powerful argument against it, an argument whose central premise is just an explication of the very *concept* of phenomenal character.

## 1. Clarifying the debate over phenomenal particularism

The debate is over this view:

---

<sup>4</sup> The commitment to phenomenal particularism is most explicit in Campbell (2002, p. 116); Martin (2004, p. 83); Fish (2009, pp. 14–15); Genone (2014, p. 345) and (2016, p. 13); Gomes (2017, pp. 534–535). For other works that are naturally read as endorsing phenomenal particularism, see Martin (2002) and (2006); Sturgeon (2008); Brewer (2011); Nanay (2012).

<sup>5</sup> [Brief identifying remark removed.] Those who join me in rejecting phenomenal particularism include Chalmers (2006); Tye (2009); Pautz (2009); Siegel (2010, ch. 6); Millar (2014); Schellenberg (forthcoming).

**Phenomenal particularism:** Some perceptual phenomenal characters are either (i) perceived particulars, or (ii) properties of being a distinctive relation to perceived particulars.<sup>6</sup>

For example, the phenomenal particularist might think that when I see a ripe orange mango, one of the phenomenal characters of my perceptual experience is either (i) that particular mango, or (ii) the property (instantiated by the experience) of being a visual perception of that particular mango.

Let me spell out exactly what this formulation of phenomenal particularism comes to and why I have chosen it. By way of preface, let me say that I believe that, often enough, the *real* disputes over claims such as phenomenal particularism have gotten tangled with *merely verbal* disputes. That has made it harder than it needs to be to make philosophical progress. For this reason, I propose to tread with special care in fixing the references of various technical terms.

*On the notion of the perceptual.* I use the term **perceptual**, and cognates terms like **perception**, in a robust sense. Of course, I mean to contrast perceptions with post-perceptual mental states such as beliefs.<sup>7</sup> But I also mean to contrast perceptions with hallucinations and with sensory imaginings. Perceptions are a “good case,” in some relevant epistemic sense.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> I will understand phenomenal particularism as a view about *mature, psychologically normal human subjects*. Note also that the view makes a contingent claim. Thus you can deny phenomenal particularism while accepting that there *could* have been some perceptual phenomenal characters satisfying either (i) or (ii).

<sup>7</sup> Some, like Byrne (2009), hold that certain perceptions *just are* beliefs. If that is so, then let us instead contrast perceptions with *paradigmatic* beliefs.

<sup>8</sup> Having a perception may not always put the subject in a position to have perceptual knowledge, for the subject might have misleading evidence that her perceptual apparatus is unreliable. But even in this kind of case, there is an intuitive sense in which the subject is in an epistemically good situation with respect to the perception itself.

Theorists disagree about whether illusions are always, sometimes, or never perceptions – they disagree about whether illusions are a good case, in the relevant epistemic sense – so I will leave that matter open.

I have framed the dispute over phenomenal particularism as a dispute about the phenomenal character *of perception alone*. Why? – To avoid certain extraneous questions. I wish to avoid questions about the phenomenal characters of cognitive episodes, such as the question of whether, when I just *think* about my mother, she herself might figure in the phenomenal character of my thought. I wish also to avoid questions about the phenomenal character of hallucination, since it is especially controversial what the phenomenal character of hallucination is, or even whether hallucinations have phenomenal characters in the first place.<sup>9</sup>

*On the notion of particulars, especially those that we perceive.* **Particulars** are most naturally contrasted with **properties**, where the latter are being understood broadly so as to include relations as well as properties in the narrow sense. Note well: property-*instantiations* are particulars, while properties *simpliciter* are not. In addition, perhaps there are entities that are neither particulars nor properties – sets, numbers, propositions? I do not know.

In any case, I take it that we perceive particulars of many different varieties. I take it that we perceive particular *objects*, such as tables and chairs; particular *events*, such as the event of a baseball being thrown; particular *states*, such as the state of a bookshelf sagging with heavy books; and particular *property-instantiations*, such as instantiations of redness and roundness. I leave open whether, in addition to perceiving property-instantiations (which are particulars), we also perceive properties (which are not particulars).

---

<sup>9</sup> Sturgeon (2008), Fish (2009), and Logue (2012) say that hallucinations have no phenomenal character.

*On the notion of phenomenal character.* What a slippery notion this is! The basic idea is that there is something it's like to see purple or hear a cello, and those are the phenomenal characters of those experiences. So, to a *very* rough first approximation, the phenomenal character of an experience is what it's like, in full or in part, to have that experience.<sup>10</sup> To give you fair warning: I believe that this first approximation is woefully inadequate, and I will devote all of §3 to finding a better one. But let us make do with it for now.

An experience usually has many phenomenal characters: when I see a purple eggplant, there is a phenomenal character associated with my seeing its color, a phenomenal character associated with my seeing its shape, and so on. That is why the first approximation says that a phenomenal character of an experience is what it's like, *in full or in part*, to have that experience. But I do not mean to assume that phenomenal characters have a mereological structure. I do not mean to say anything about the exact relationship between partial and full phenomenal characters.

It is a controversial question whether a phenomenal character of an experience must by definition be a property of the experience. The standard view is that yes, it must be.<sup>11</sup> But some take the non-standard view that what it's like to have an experience need not be, by definition, a property of the experience. The idea is usually that what it's like to have an experience may instead be some other entity<sup>12</sup> that *is experienced*.<sup>13</sup> Thus I have defined phenomenal particularism disjunctively, as the view that some perceptual phenomenal characters either (i) are properties of standing in a distinctive relation to perceived particulars, or (ii) are just

---

<sup>10</sup> It was Nagel (1974) who made it commonplace for philosophers to speak of what it's like to have an experience, though he devotes more attention to what it's like *to be a subject*.

<sup>11</sup> Snowdon (2010, p. 21) is helpfully explicit about the reasoning for a view very similar to this one, though he does not use the term "phenomenal character."

<sup>12</sup> I use the term "entity" as a broad sortal that includes properties, feature-instantiations, objects, events, and states.

<sup>13</sup> For some examples of the non-standard view, see Dretske (2003, p. 67); Tye (2009, p. 119).

identical to perceived particulars. If you think that phenomenal characters are properties of experiences, then you should focus on condition (i) when evaluating phenomenal particularism. If you think that phenomenal characters are not properties of experiences, then you should focus on condition (ii) when evaluating phenomenal particularism.

That concludes my clarification of the phenomenal particularist view. For reference, here it is again:

**Phenomenal particularism:** Some perceptual phenomenal characters are either (i) perceived particulars, or (ii) properties of being a distinctive relation to perceived particulars.

The dispute between the phenomenal particularist and the phenomenal non-particularist comes out most clearly when we contrast two cases of perception that are as similar as possible, except that two distinct particulars are perceived. Thus we might have the same subject, under the same environmental conditions, visually attending in the same way to distinct but intrinsically identical mangoes at distinct times. The phenomenal particularist holds that the phenomenal characters of these perceptual experiences might be different, insofar as those phenomenal characters might be distinct mangoes, or the properties of being visual perceptions of distinct mangoes, or something along those lines. The phenomenal non-particularist denies this.

My thesis in this paper is that phenomenal particularism is false.

## 2. Motivations for phenomenal particularism

The main motivations for phenomenal particularism fall into three broad families. The motivations in the first family are *semantic*, and include the idea that perceptual experiences can put us in a position to refer, demonstratively, to the particulars that we perceive. The motivations in the second family of motivations are *epistemic*. These include the idea that perceptual experiences can put us in a position to know about the particulars that we perceive. Finally, the motivations in the third family are *introspective*. In some way, these motivations express how perceptual experiences, or even imaginative experiences, strike us when we introspect. For each motivation, the idea is that phenomenal particularism is especially well-poised to explain it. The challenge for the phenomenal non-particularist, then, is to explain (or explain away) each of these motivating ideas.<sup>14</sup>

Many phenomenal non-particularists have risen to the challenge, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate whether they have met it.<sup>15</sup> I will simply argue that phenomenal particularism encounters a serious conceptual problem that has not yet been noticed.

### 3. The concept of phenomenal character

The seed of the argument against phenomenal particularism is this. *By definition*, a phenomenal character is anything that belongs to the kind associated with the entities that play enough of certain theoretical roles. The theoretical roles I have in mind are these: being what is most central to it's like to have an experience; being introspectible; generating explanatory gap

---

<sup>14</sup> For the semantic motivations, see Campbell (2002). For the epistemic motivations, see McDowell (1994) – though it is not clear to me that his view has to do with *phenomenal character* of perception. And for the introspective motivations, see Martin (2002), Hellie (2007), and Fish (2009, pp. 18-23). Of course, as with any major philosophical view, there are further motivations that are less mainstream: see for example Logue (2012).

<sup>15</sup> I develop my response to the challenge in [Author's Work B] and [Author's Work C]. See also the theorists cited in fn. 5.

intuitions, missing knowledge intuitions, conceivable absence intuitions, and conceivable inversion intuitions; and having a nature that is apparently revealed to us via introspection. But whether we look at the properties of standing in some distinctive relation to perceived particulars, or at the perceived particulars themselves, we find that they do not belong to the kind associated with the entities that play enough of these roles. So phenomenal particularism is false.<sup>16</sup>

In the rest of the paper, I nurture this argumentative seed into full flower. This section is devoted to a conceptual analysis of the term “phenomenal character,” as that term has been used in the philosophical literature.

Well – almost. When we philosophers address vexed topics, we like to use our own terms, or to use common terms in our own idiosyncratic ways. I submit that an enormous number of philosophers of mind have used *some* term or other with the meaning that I will describe, and it is that term that I mean to analyze.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.1. The standard definition

Before I propose an analysis, I must discuss the utterly standard definition of the term. It goes like this: the *phenomenal character* of any experience is what it’s like to have that experience.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Carruthers and Veillet (2011) use the same broad strategy to argue that there is no phenomenal character associated with applying concepts in perception. Their argument has been contested by McClelland (2016). Below I will argue that objections of the kind that McClelland raises, whatever their merits against the argument of Carruthers and Veillet, are not successful against my argument.

<sup>17</sup> For some examples of alternative terminology, see fn. xx.

<sup>18</sup> This characterization stems from Nagel (1974), though he uses the term *subjective character* instead. The characterization is now so dominant that it would be pedestrian to cite examples. Note also that many philosophers do not explicitly state how they are using the term *phenomenal character* (or some term in the neighborhood): see, for example, Martin (2002), (2004), (2006); Logue (2012). But given how standard the “what-it’s-like” definition is, I presume that this definition is the intended one.



But I believe that this standard definition is woefully inadequate: *without further narrowing*, that definition is so broad that it includes many topics that are obviously not what most philosophers mean to be discussing. For suppose that you ask me what it was like for me to see Cirque du Soleil in New York. I might truly answer with some description of my emotional reaction: I might say that my experience was surprising and exciting. But it is a controversial philosophical claim that surprise and excitement are phenomenal characters of my visual experience of Cirque du Soleil.

To be clear, what is controversial here is not the claim that emotional states or properties *have* phenomenal characters; what is controversial here is the claim that emotional states or properties *are* phenomenal characters of my visual experience of Cirque du Soleil. For one thing, phenomenal characters are often thought to be inexpressible in ordinary language, but there is hardly anything special about words like “surprising” and “exciting.” For another thing, most philosophical theories entail that emotional states or properties are not phenomenal characters of my visual experience. Indeed, this claim is even rejected by many phenomenal particularists: many phenomenal particularists think that the phenomenal character of my visual experience of Cirque du Soleil is simply *what I saw*, and I did not see my own surprise and excitement.<sup>19</sup>

For those who still think that the term “phenomenal character” is adequately defined as “what it’s like to have an experience,” I will add a report from the trenches: I have *never* been able to get the uninitiated – e.g., undergraduates, or philosophers unfamiliar with debates about consciousness – to understand the term “phenomenal character” just by giving that simple

---

<sup>19</sup> You will find the occasional philosopher who takes it as *obvious* that emotional states or properties are phenomenal characters: see Hellie (2007, pp. 261-262) for example. But this is clearly a non-standard position, and I suggest that such philosophers are using terms like “phenomenal character” to mean something different than what is usually meant.

definition. The problem cannot be that talk of “what it’s like” is technical – it is obviously not, since ordinary folk use the expression all the time. I suggest that the problem is instead that the “what it’s like” definition of phenomenal character is too broad. We need something more to lock onto the right referent.

There is, of course, a standard *supplement* to the standard “what it’s like” definition, but I think that the standard supplement does not narrow the definition enough. The supplement is to point to some examples: to say that there is something it’s like to see purple, to hear a cello, and so on. But notice: if you ask someone what it’s like to see purple, she may truly answer, “It’s simply *wonderful*.” That is, she may truly answer by listing the emotions that she feels when she sees purple. And, I repeat, it is very controversial that emotional states or properties *just are* phenomenal characters.<sup>20</sup>

Another standard move is to connect the term *phenomenal character* to other terms in the neighborhood: perhaps *phenomenology*, *subjectivity*, *awareness*, or *consciousness*.<sup>21</sup> This will not do the trick. For some of these terms, such as *phenomenology*, are entirely technical and so cannot help the uninitiated. Others of these terms, such as *consciousness*, are wildly polysemous – some philosophers say that it has more than half a dozen different meanings<sup>22</sup> – and in any case the connections still do not solve the problem. For, again, if you ask someone what it’s like to have

---

<sup>20</sup> It does not even help to contrast various examples – to say that what it’s like to see red is different from what it’s like to see purple. For those experiences might easily produce *slightly* different emotional responses in their subjects.

<sup>21</sup> For example: Lycan (1996) uses the term *qualia* as I use the term *phenomenal character*, but defines qualia in terms of “phenomenal individuals” (p. 69); Tye (1996) defines *phenomenal consciousness* in terms of “immediate subjective ‘feel’” (p. 4); Sturgeon (2008) explains that “the conscious character of Good cases” is “what it is consciously like to enjoy Good visual experience” (p. 116); and Genone (2016) defines *perceptual phenomenology* in terms of “the phenomena consciously encountered in perception” (p. 13).

<sup>22</sup> Lycan (1996, ch. 1) identifies eight.

any instance of *subjective conscious awareness*, then she can truly answer by reporting her emotions.<sup>23</sup>

At this point, you may be tempted to give up; to think that the reference of the term has not been held in place well enough to kick off philosophical discussion.<sup>24</sup> But this reaction is not warranted just yet. If the standard explicit definitions of the term *phenomenal character* are not enough, then the natural thing to do is to look at the *actual usage* that philosophers make of the term, so that we can take that usage to be an *implicit* supplement to the “what it’s like” definition.<sup>25</sup> Let us see whether this proposal might succeed.

### 3.2. A reference-fixing definition: introduction and clarifications

When I survey the actual usage that philosophers have made, I find that they make frequent appeal to certain *theoretical roles*. I suggest that we can use these theoretical roles to fix the reference of the term *phenomenal character*.

Here is a list of the roles that I have in mind:

1. The **what-it’s-like role**: It is central to what it’s like to have an experience, in full or in part.
2. The **introspectibility role**: It is introspectible.
3. The **explanatory gap role**: We seem unable to understand how it could *just be* a non-phenomenally conceived entity.

---

<sup>23</sup> See also Snowdon (2010), who argues on different grounds for the conclusion that the what-it’s-like characterization (which he takes as a characterization of *experience*) will not do.

<sup>24</sup> Chalmers (1996, p. 4) offers the slightly different suggestion that the concept of *conscious experience* is conceptually primitive.

<sup>25</sup> This is an application of the strategy recommended in Lewis (1970) for defining theoretical terms.

4. The **missing knowledge role**: We seem unable to know everything about it just on the basis of having all non-phenomenally conceived information.
5. The **conceivable absence role**: We seem to be able to conceive of it as present in one subject  $S$  yet absent in some other subject who is identical to  $S$  in all functional, physical, and independent phenomenal respects.
6. The **conceivable inversion role**: We seem to be able to conceive of it as invertible across subjects who are identical in all functional, physical, and independent phenomenal respects.

My basic idea is this. First, we can use the roles to identify the paradigmatic phenomenal characters. Then, we can use those paradigms to lock onto the kind, thereby pulling in any non-paradigmatic phenomenal characters. (We might even end up pushing out some entities that seemed to be paradigmatic phenomenal characters but turned out not to be phenomenal characters at all.) In short, my proposal is that:

A **phenomenal character** is, by definition, anything that belongs to the kind associated with the entities that play enough of roles 1-6.

Before I defend the proposal, let me clarify why I have framed role 1, the what-it's-like role, in the way that I have. It would have been simpler for me to say that paradigmatic phenomenal characters are what it's like to have an experience, in full or in part; instead I have said that paradigmatic phenomenal characters are *especially central* to what it's like to have an experience, in full or in part.

I have added this wrinkle because some philosophers hold the following two-part view. On the one hand, they hold that what it's like to have an experience must by definition be a property of the experience. On the other hand, they hold that the more philosophically central entity is not a property of the experience; perhaps it is instead an entity that is experienced. Suppose, for example, that I see a blue cup. The first part of the idea might be that the property *being a visual perception of this blue cup* is a phenomenal character of my experience. But the second part of the idea might be that what is most immediately available for introspection, and what is in some sense more epistemically significant or more metaphysically basic, is just the particular blue cup that I see.<sup>26</sup>

I want to talk about the philosophically central entity implicated in what it's like to have an experience, *whether or not* that philosophically central entity is a property of the experience. It is for this reason that I have framed the what-it's-like role in the way that I have – again, as the role of being *central* to what it's like to have an experience, in full or in part.

### 3.3. A defense of the reference-fixing definition

I have proposed that, by definition, a phenomenal character is anything that belongs to the kind associated with the entities that play enough of roles 1-6. Let me say why I am partial to this proposal.

---

<sup>26</sup> This is more or less the line taken by Fish (2009, p. 16), Kennedy (2009, pp. 590-601), and Genone (2016, p. 13). As for the more philosophically central entity, Fish calls it “presentational character,” Kennedy calls it “phenomenological input,” and Genone calls it “perceptual phenomenology.”

But do note that a phenomenal particularist might instead hold that what is especially metaphysically or epistemically central here *is* a property of the experience. E.g., Martin (2002), (2004), (2006) would agree that one phenomenal character of my experience of the blue cup is the property of *being a visual perception of this blue cup*, but he seems also to think that this property of the experience has some special epistemic or metaphysical significance.

I am partial to the proposal partly because of the enormous attention that philosophers have given to these theoretical roles. Just glance at this list of the flagship discussions of these roles:

1. On the what-it's-like role: Nagel (1974).
2. On the introspectibility role: Just about anyone.
3. On the explanatory gap role: Levine (1983).
4. On the missing knowledge role: Nagel (1974); Jackson (1982).
5. On the conceivable absence role: Chalmers (1996).
6. On the conceivable inversion role: Shoemaker (1982).

These works are readily recognizable as among the most influential discussions of phenomenal character (or “consciousness,” “subjective character,” etc.) of the final decades of the twentieth century. That is one reason for thinking that the theoretical roles examined in these works really have helped to fix the reference of the term “phenomenal character.”

There is another reason that I am partial to defining the term *phenomenal character* via these theoretical roles. Recall my earlier report that I have *never* been able to get the uninitiated to understand the term “phenomenal character” just by appealing to what it’s like to have an experience. To complete that report, let me add that I have *almost always* been able to get the uninitiated to understand the term “phenomenal character” by supplementing the “what it’s like” description with appeal to theoretical roles 2-6. In fact, that is the *only* way that I have found to get the uninitiated to use the term in the way that philosophers typically do. That suggests to me that it is also the way that the initiated understand the term, however implicit that understanding may be.

There is a simpler way that I could have defined phenomenal character in terms of the theoretical roles: I could have said that by definition, a phenomenal character is anything that plays enough of roles 1-6. Instead, I have said that by definition, a phenomenal character is anything that belongs to the *kind* associated with the entities that play enough of roles 1-6. Why have I opted for this nuance?

Partly because it is important to allow that some phenomenal characters might play almost none of these roles, and partly because it is important to allow that some entities that play all of these roles might not be phenomenal characters.

On the possibility that some phenomenal characters might play almost none of these roles: some mole-rats have magnetoreceptive perceptual experiences, which is to say that they perceive magnetic fields. Perhaps these magnetoreceptive experiences have phenomenal characters. But perhaps mole-rats cannot introspect, in which case these magnetoreceptive phenomenal characters do not play role 2. And perhaps most of us have never before even entertained the existence of magnetoreceptive phenomenal characters, so such phenomenal characters do not seem any way at all to us and thus do not play roles 3-6. Still, there can be magnetoreceptive phenomenal characters as long as they are *of a kind* with the phenomenal characters that do play enough of roles 1-6. My proposed definition allows for this possibility.

On the possibility that some entities that play enough of roles 1-6 might not be phenomenal characters: take any phenomenal character you like – call it **F**. Just for illustration, suppose that **F** is a property. If **F** plays roles 1-6, then here is another property that will likely play roles 1-6: the property of *being F and existing on a Tuesday*. But this may well not be a phenomenal character, for it may not belong to the relevant kind. My proposed definition allows for this possibility, as well.

There is another way that I might have simplified my definition: instead of speaking about the entities that play *enough* of roles 1-6, I could have spoken about the entities that play *all* of roles 1-6. Why have I opted for this complication?

Because this portion of the definition is meant to let us collect the likely *paradigm examples* of phenomenal character, and even many paradigmatic phenomenal characters arguably do not play all of the roles. Consider the phenomenal characters associated with olfaction. Arguably, these phenomenal characters do not play role 6, the conceivable inversion role. For the olfactory quality space is highly asymmetric, so that inversion is arguably not conceivable across two subjects who are physically and functionally identical. But even if this is so, we should still take the phenomenal characters associated with olfaction as *paradigms* of phenomenal character. It has been suggested that many other paradigmatic phenomenal characters, such as those associated with seeing distance, texture, and shape, also do not play *all* of roles 1-6.<sup>27</sup>

Now consider the fact that roles 3-6 implicate philosophical problems that, presumably, we should aim to solve. Some will worry that the present definition of phenomenal character rules out the possibility that we can solve the problems. After all, we have built the fact that phenomenal character generates the problems into the very definition of the concept.

This objection is misguided. To say that a problem *exists* is not to say that it has no solution; presumably every philosophical problem has a solution.<sup>28</sup> And since our definition of phenomenal character is a shallow reference-fixing one rather than a deep metaphysical one, the definition leaves open the possibility that all of the problems regarding phenomenal

---

<sup>27</sup> See McClelland (2016, pp. 543-544).

<sup>28</sup> As Sundström eloquently puts it: “If physicalism is true and yet strikes us as puzzling or even absurd, this is presumably on account of our perspective on things. For presumably nothing is puzzling or absurd in itself” (2017, p. 3).



character will soon be solved and will no longer plague anyone. In fact, I have been careful to describe the problems implicated in 3-6 in such a way as to remain maximally neutral about how they are to be solved. It is a plain sociological fact that these problems regarding phenomenal character are problems *for many of us*, and the theoretical neutrality about how they are to be solved is another virtue of my proposed definition.

To be sure, the definition does presuppose that there are some entities that play enough of roles 1-6, and that these entities are associated with some relevant kind. So if it turns out that not a single entity plays enough of roles 1-6, or that these entities are not associated with any relevant kind, then there is a presupposition failure and so the definition does not pick out anything.

True enough; but that is an *advantage* of the definition. For it is possible to be a **phenomenal eliminativist**, i.e., to hold that phenomenal character does not exist. The definition clarifies what phenomenal eliminativism consists in: it consists in denying that there is anything that plays enough of roles 1-6.<sup>29</sup> And, in fact, that seems to aptly describe the views of many who regard themselves as phenomenal eliminativists.<sup>30</sup>

Thus it seems to me that the proposed definition is a promising one.

#### 3.4. An objection from the phenomenal particularist

There is a final objection to the definition that will be especially salient to some phenomenal particularists. I have been characterizing *one* central concept of phenomenal character – but some phenomenal particularists will complain that there are many others, given the

---

<sup>29</sup> On some views, it would take even more than this for the concept of phenomenal character to have no referent. See Hellie (2007, p. 285), for example.

<sup>30</sup> That is the effectively the stance of Dennett (1988), though his list of the relevant theoretical roles is quite different from mine.

divergences in philosophical usage. And even if I have correctly defined one of those concepts, perhaps that is not a concept that these phenomenal particularists mean to be using.

There is something right about this complaint, I think. Take a hard look at the writings of phenomenal particularists: while you will find frequent mention of what experiences are like and of introspection, you will find little mention of explanatory gaps, missing knowledge, conceivable absences, or conceivable inversions.<sup>31</sup> What you *will* find is frequent mention of certain facts about illusion and hallucination. For example, you will find frequent mention of: the fact that in typical cases of illusion, subjects are disposed to believe that perceived objects have properties that they do not have; the fact that in typical cases of hallucination, subjects are disposed to believe that they are perceiving objects and properties that they are not perceiving; the fact that in illusion and hallucination, subjects typically cannot distinguish their experiences from non-illusory perceptual experiences; and the fact that perceptions put us in a position to think about perceived objects as mind-independent and as the categorical grounds that underlie various dispositions.<sup>32</sup>

This leads me to suspect that many – though not all – phenomenal particularists are working with a different concept of phenomenal character, one defined by another set of theoretical roles that has only slight overlap with roles 1-6.<sup>33</sup> (The overlap is in roles 1-2 – the what-it’s-like and introspectibility roles.) And I find some further confirmation of my suspicion

---

<sup>31</sup> Some phenomenal particularists might be exceptions to the rule, however. A clear example is Fish (2008), who engages carefully with the explanatory gap problem; a less clear example might be Martin (2006), who compares a certain objection to his account to a concern about “absent qualia and philosophical zombies” (p. 375). If these theorists are working with the concept of phenomenal character discussed here, then they are obviously vulnerably to the argument that I will provide.

<sup>32</sup> See Campbell (2002, esp. ch. 6); Martin (2004) and (2006); Crane (2006, pp. 131-132); Fish (2009, esp. chs. 4 and 6); Brewer (2011, esp. section 2 of ch. 5); Logue (2012); Genone (2014) and (2016); Soteriou (2016, esp. ch. 6).

<sup>33</sup> For remarks *somewhere* in this vicinity, see Hellie (2007, conclusion) and Crane (2006, p. 127).

in the fact that phenomenal particularists rarely discuss type physicalism, even though type physicalism is a major philosophical view about phenomenal character.<sup>34</sup> This paucity of discussion makes perfect sense if phenomenal particularists mean to be discussing a notion distinctively associated with *perception*, since type physicalism is just not a theory of perception.<sup>35</sup>

So are these phenomenal particularists, the ones working with some other concept of phenomenal character, off the hook from my argument?

Almost without exception, they are not. For think about the standard versions of phenomenal particularism, a cluster of views that goes by the name of “naïve realism” (or “relationalism”). Who is the stock villain of the standard naïve realist story? A character called the “representationalist” (or the “intentionalist”) – again, a label that covers a cluster of views. *Over and over*, the naïve realists of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century take themselves to be offering a theory in competition with various representationalist theories.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> For a rare naïve realist discussion of type physicalism, see Crane (2006) on the “qualia theory.” But Crane largely agrees with me on the current point: he notes that the qualia theory “does not seem to be a direct response to these problems” (p. 142) – i.e., the problems of illusion and hallucination.

<sup>35</sup> One more piece of confirmation: the causal theory of perception is a theory of perception that pairs naturally with type physicalism, and phenomenal particularists *do* routinely discuss the causal theory.

<sup>36</sup> The sense datum theorist is another of their stock villains, but a less interesting one, given how few of those are around today. For naïve realists or relationalists who take the representationalist as their stock villain, see Martin (2002), (2004), (2006); Campbell (2002); Crane (2006); Fish (2009); Kennedy (2009); Brewer (2011); Logue (2012); Genone (2014), (2016); Soteriou (2016).

There are, by the way, some hybrid theories – theories that combine elements of naïve realism with elements of representationalism. Whether these theories are among my targets depends entirely on whether they take phenomenal particularism on board, e.g., by accepting naïve realism *as a theory of perceptual phenomenal character*. Logue (forthcoming) gives a hybrid theory that does take phenomenal particularism on board; Siegel (2010) and Schellenberg (forthcoming) give hybrid theories that do not take phenomenal particularism on board.

But look at the canonical representationalist works, which appeared at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century: Gilbert Harman's "The intrinsic quality of experience," Michael Tye's *Ten Problems of Consciousness*, Fred Dretske's *Naturalizing the Mind*, and William Lycan's *Consciousness and Experience*. There were earlier precursors to representationalism,<sup>37</sup> but these four works contain the expressions of the view that launched it to prominence. And within these canonical representationalist works, the concept of phenomenal character that I have described is *absolutely standard*. It is expressed with various terms, but in every case it is the concept described here that the term expresses.<sup>38</sup>

So if naïve realists are looking to replace representationalism, in any of its canonical forms, as a theory of phenomenal character, then they need to be discussing phenomenal character *in the sense described here*. Otherwise, they may be giving perfectly good theories of some other phenomenon, but they will not be giving theories that are even in the running to replace the canonical versions of representationalism about phenomenal character.<sup>39</sup>

The point is not, by the way, symmetrical. Those responsible for the twenty-first century revival of naïve realism bill themselves as responding to representationalists, but the canonical representationalists of the late twentieth century do *not* bill themselves as responding

---

<sup>37</sup> Such as Hall (1961).

<sup>38</sup> Harman (1990) uses the term "subjective feel" (p. 33) and discusses the what-it's-like role, the introspectibility role, the missing knowledge role, and the inversion role. Tye (1995) uses the term "phenomenal consciousness" (p. 3) and discusses all of roles 1-6. Dretske (1995) uses the term "qualia" and discusses the what-it's-like role (p. 81), the missing knowledge role (starting on p. 81), and the conceivable inversion role (p. 72). Just like Dretske, Lycan (1996) uses the term "qualia" and discusses the explanatory gap role (pp. 45-68), the missing knowledge role (pp. 91-108), and the conceivable inversion role (pp. 109-141).

<sup>39</sup> Of course, even the canonical representationalists sometimes also address the kinds of questions about illusion and hallucination that are the focal point of most naïve realist works. So consider those naïve realists who are using some other concept of phenomenal character. Perhaps their naïve realist theories are in the running to replace representationalism *as a theory of certain aspects of illusion and hallucination*. Still, they are not in the running to replace representationalism *as a theory of phenomenal character, in the present sense*.

to naïve realists, or even to their predecessors. There certainly existed a number of historically important thinkers who inspired present-day naïve realists, and who came before the canonical representationalists – I am thinking especially of Austin, Hinton, and Snowdon. But scour the four canonical representationalist works that I mentioned above, and you will find *not a single citation* of any of these thinkers.<sup>40</sup> In these canonical representationalist stories, the stock villains are instead dualists, type-physicalists, and sometimes adverbialists.

Some phenomenal particularists will now have a different worry. They will worry that the term *phenomenal character*, as I have defined it, might have some merely sociological importance, but that the term does not pick out anything. In other words, they will worry that we should be eliminativists about *this* sort of phenomenal character. This is an important concern, and I propose to gather more resources so that, later in the paper, we can give it the careful consideration that it deserves.

### 3.5. Summary

From these arguments, I draw the following conclusions:

1. A phenomenal character is, by *one* definition that has had great philosophical influence, anything that belongs to the relevant kind associated with the entities that play enough of roles 1-6.

2. This definition should matter to actual phenomenal particularists, at least insofar as they take themselves even to be in the running to replace the canonical versions of representationalism about phenomenal character.

---

<sup>40</sup> Although things are arguably different when it comes to some *contemporary* representationalist theories. Arguably, some contemporary representationalists – but only some of them – take themselves to be, and perhaps really are, working with the same concept(s) of phenomenal character as contemporary naïve realists/relationalists.

*A qualification to these conclusions:* I freely admit that there may be *other* important definitions of phenomenal character, perhaps definitions drawing in part on various features of illusion and hallucination. And I freely admit that phenomenal particularists may be giving correct theories of phenomenal character as defined in these alternative ways. But that has no immediate bearing on whether phenomenal particularism is a correct theory of phenomenal character in the sense that dominated late 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy. Thus, for the rest of this paper, I set aside any alternative definitions of phenomenal character so that I can focus exclusively on the definition that goes via roles 1-6.

I say that given *this* philosophically influential understanding of phenomenal character, phenomenal particularism is false.

#### 4. A paradigmatic phenomenal character

In this section, I will point to an entity, which I will call *scarlet\**. I will make it plain that *scarlet\** is neither a perceived particular nor a property of being a distinctive relation to a perceived particular. And I will then show that *scarlet\** is a paradigmatic example of a phenomenal character.

The argument will be meticulous even though its conclusion should not be controversial – not even to the phenomenal particularist.<sup>41</sup> In effect, the conclusion is that at least one phenomenal character *is not* either a perceived particular or a property of being a distinctive relation to a perceived particular. And that is of course compatible with the phenomenal particularist's view that at least one phenomenal character *is* either a perceived particular or a property of standing in a distinctive relation to a perceived particular. The point

---

<sup>41</sup> Although perhaps Brewer (cite) rejects it.

of the argument is just to give us a sharp contrast: once we see what a paradigmatic phenomenal character looks like, it will be easy for us to verify later that phenomenal particularism is false.

So take a good, long look at a scarlet plate in normal lighting conditions. Introspectively attend to the entity – call it **scarlet\*** – that is associated with your experience of the paradigmatically scarlet-looking parts of the plate’s surface. Some pointers on how to attend to scarlet\*: you will not be attending to scarlet\* insofar as you are attending to especially bright highlights or deep shadows on the surface of the scarlet plate. However, you will (at least apparently) be in a position to attend to scarlet\* when you look at a white plate illuminated by scarlet lighting.<sup>42</sup>

The exact nature of scarlet\* will be a matter of dispute: perhaps it is a physical property, perhaps not; perhaps it is a property of the plate, or a property of my mind, or a relation between my mind and the plate. But these disputes are irrelevant for our purposes. What matters is that scarlet\*, whatever it might be, is not a perceived particular, nor is it a property of being a distinctive relation to a perceived particular. For you can find one and the same entity, scarlet\*, by introspecting on a visual perception of *any* scarlet plate in normal lighting conditions. But there is no perceived particular that is common to all of your possible visual perceptions of scarlet plates in favorable conditions: there are many different particular scarlet plates that you might perceive, and the particulars that you perceive – the particular objects, the particular property-instantiations, etc. – will be different in each case. So, I repeat, scarlet\* is not a perceived particular, nor is it a property of being a distinctive relation to a perceived particular.

---

<sup>42</sup> Cite Millar?

Scarlet\* is not just a phenomenal character. It is a *paradigmatic* phenomenal character. For it satisfies all of roles 1-6, as we shall now verify. Start with:

1. The what-it's-like role: It is whatever is most central to what it's like, in full or in part, to have an experience.

I take it to be evident that scarlet\* is most central to what it's like for you to see the scarlet plate, *in part*. It is whatever is most central to what it's like for you to see the plate *insofar* as you see the color of the plate.

As for:

2. The introspectibility role: It is introspectible.

It is also evident that you can introspectively attend to scarlet\*. I just gave you pointers on how to do so.

Next we have a series of connected roles:

3. The explanatory gap role: We seem unable to understand how it could *just be* a non-phenomenally conceived entity.

Suppose that a scientist suggests that scarlet\* is nothing more than (e.g.) a certain surface reflectance property, or a certain pattern of neural firing. Any such claim seems to engender an explanatory gap: it seems that we can sensibly ask *how* this reduction could be true. Learning all of the non-phenomenally conceived facts, most relevantly the physical facts about surface



reflectance properties and neural firing patterns, seems to bring us no closer to understanding how the scientist's proposed reduction could be correct. The explanatory gap seems to be generated if the scientist identifies scarlet\* with anything conceived non-phenomenally.

The same basic point shows that scarlet\* plays:

4. The missing knowledge role: We seem unable to know everything about it just on the basis of having all non-phenomenally conceived information.

Given what the scientist can tell us about (e.g.) neural firing patterns, and more generally given anything that the scientist can tell us about the world in non-phenomenal terms, we seem unable to deduce that scarlet\* is just some particular neural firing pattern.

For much the same reasons, we seem able to conceive of a world meeting the scientist's description in which scarlet\* (along with every other color\*) is absent, per 5:

5. The conceivable absence role: We seem to be able to conceive of it as present in one subject *S* yet absent in some other subject who is identical to *S* in all functional, physical, and other phenomenal respects.

We likewise seem to be able to conceive of a world meeting the scientist's description in which these colors\* are not absent, but merely inverted, per 6:

6. The conceivable inversion role: We seem to be able to conceive of it as invertible across subjects who are identical in all functional, physical, and other phenomenal respects.

For we seem able to conceive of a world just like ours in all functional and physical respects, but in which all of the colors\* are rotated: for example, scarlet\* is instantiated wherever emerald\* is instantiated in our world, and vice-versa.<sup>43</sup>

None of this should be controversial. The *bog-standard way* to illustrate the explanatory gap, knowledge, conceivability, and inversion problems is by appeal to entities like scarlet\*.

Clearly, then, *some* phenomenal characters of perceptual experiences are not perceived particulars, nor are they properties of being a distinctive relation to perceived particulars. Scarlet\* is an example of such a phenomenal character – at least, it is an example of such a phenomenal character *if* there are any phenomenal characters at all.

## 5. Against phenomenal particularism, part 1

Now consider any perceived particulars, as well as any properties of being a distinctive relation to perceived particulars. I will argue that these *never* belong to the relevant kind associated with the entities that play enough of roles 1-6, and I will conclude that these are *never* perceptual phenomenal characters. In this section, I will defend this conclusion about perceived objects, states, and events, and in the next section I will defend this conclusion about perceived property-instantiations. Put these conclusions together and you get the conclusion that phenomenal particularism is false.

We can start by seeing whether perceived *objects*, or properties of being a distinctive relation to perceived objects, play enough of roles 1-6. Return to the case in which I see a

---

<sup>43</sup> Emerald\* and other colors\* are to be understood analogously to scarlet\*. Just follow the instructions that I gave at the beginning of this section, but imagine seeing an emerald-green plate, or a plate of any other color, instead of a scarlet plate.

scarlet plate: let us take the particular scarlet plate as a representative example of a perceived object, and the relation of seeing that particular scarlet plate as a representative example of a relation to a perceived object. Here are the first two roles:

1. The what-it's-like role: It is whatever is most central to what it's like, in full or in part, to have an experience.
2. The introspectibility role: It is introspectible.

I have suggested that role 1 is very broad. It is so broad that it is routinely played even by emotional states or properties. So I am willing to grant, at least for the sake of argument, that role 1 can be played by the scarlet plate, and also by the property of being a visual perception of the scarlet plate. In addition, the scarlet plate and the property of being a visual perception of the scarlet plate both arguably play role 2, the introspectibility role: when I see a scarlet plate, I can introspectively attend to that very plate, and perhaps I can also introspectively attend to my experience's being a visual perception of that very plate.

But the scarlet plate, and the property of being a visual perception of the scarlet plate, both fail to play any of roles 3-6. It is easy to miss the point, because these roles are played by entities associated with perceiving the *properties* of the scarlet plate. But the roles are played solely by the entities associated with perceiving the properties of the scarlet plate, and not at all by the scarlet plate itself, nor by the property of being a visual perception of the scarlet plate. Take, for instance:

3. The explanatory gap role: We seem unable to understand how it could *just be* a non-phenomenally conceived entity.

There is, as we have already seen, an explanatory gap associated with scarlet\* here, whatever scarlet\* might be. But modulo this explanatory gap, there is no remaining explanatory gap associated with seeing *this particular* scarlet plate. Suppose that I know all of the physical facts associated with my perceiving this particular plate: I know that it is light *from this particular plate* that is entering my retina, that it is *this particular plate* that my visual system tracks as I move closer to get a better view, and so on. Then it is *totally senseless* to ask how it could be that I am seeing this particular plate, rather than smelling this plate, or seeing some other plate that is safe in a cupboard in Indonesia. So the particular scarlet plate that I perceive, and the property of being a visual perception of it, both fail to play role 3, the explanatory gap role.

Or consider:

4. The missing knowledge role: We seem unable to know everything about it just on the basis of having all non-phenomenally conceived information.

We *do* seem to be in a position to know all that there is to know about the scarlet plate, and the property of being a visual perception of it, just on the basis of having all non-phenomenally conceived information – at least, given that we know all that there is to know about the phenomenal characters associated with perceiving the associated properties. Suppose that I know all that there is to know about the phenomenal characters associated with perceiving the plate's color, shape, size, and so on – that is, suppose that I know all that there is to know about scarlet\*, circularity\*, and so on. And suppose that a scientist then tells me the full physical, chemical, and biological story about the scarlet plate. Then I am apparently in a position to know everything there is to know about the scarlet plate, and about my seeing it. There is no

knowledge that I seem to be missing on either topic. What I know rules out, for example, the possibility that I am smelling the plate rather than seeing it, and it also rules out the possibility that I am seeing some other plate that is safe in a cupboard in Indonesia. So the particular plate that I perceive, and the property of being a visual perception of that particular plate, both fail to play role 4, the missing knowledge role.

Similarly for:

5. The conceivable absence role: We seem to be able to conceive of it as present in one subject *S* yet absent in some other subject who is identical to *S* in all functional, physical, and other phenomenal respects.

I do *not* seem able to conceive of a subject who is physically and functionally identical to me – and who is therefore physically and functionally identical to me with respect to his/her relations to this very scarlet plate – but who is seeing a void instead of a plate, or who is not seeing at all. At least, I cannot conceive of such a subject *except* insofar as I can conceive of a subject who does not experience scarlet\*, circularity\*, and the like. So this particular plate, and the property of being a visual perception of it, both fail to play role 5, the conceivable absence role.

Now consider:

6. The conceivable inversion role: We seem to be able to conceive of it as invertible across subjects who are identical in all functional, physical, and other phenomenal respects.

Consider two functionally and physically identical subjects, with normal visual systems, whose eyes are both aimed towards the same scarlet plate at the same angle and from the same location in physical space. (We may imagine this as occurring at two different times to avoid the problem that our two subjects could not otherwise be co-located.) Each subject is *really perceiving*, not just hallucinating. Imagine also that the two subjects are identical with respect to any phenomenal characters associated with perceiving the relevant properties: each subject experiences scarlet\*, circularity\*, and so on.

Once more, it is inconceivable that one subject sees the scarlet plate that is before her eyes, while the second subject sees some *other* plate that is safe in a cupboard in Indonesia. How could that be, given that the perceptual systems of both subjects are causally and/or constitutively hooked up in exactly the same ways to exactly the same plate? And once more, it is inconceivable that one subject is *seeing* the plate while the other is *smelling* the plate. How could that be, given that both subjects are experiencing scarlet\*, circularity\*, and so on, and given that both of these experiences are causally and/or constitutively associated with certain physical processes in the eyes? So the perceived plate, and the property of being a visual perception of it, both fail to play role 6, the conceivable inversion role.

We have now examined the *objects* that we perceive, and the properties of being a distinctive relation to those objects, and we have seen that these both fail to play any of roles 3-6. I take it that arguments of exactly the same form would show that roles 3-6 are also never played by the *events* that we perceive, such as the event of this plate breaking, or by the *states* that we perceive, such as the state of this plate sitting on the table, or by the properties of being a distinctive relation towards perceived events or states.

So these perceived objects, events, and states, as well as properties of being a distinctive relation to them, are not paradigms of perceptual phenomenal characters. But do they belong to

the relevant kind associated with the paradigms of perceptual phenomenal characters – do they belong to the relevant kind associated with entities like scarlet\*?

If they do, then the challenge is to explain why they never play enough of roles 1-6 even though they are sometimes perceptual phenomenal characters. And I confess that I cannot see how this challenge is to be met. Take for comparison my earlier remark that that there may well be phenomenal characters associated with the magnetoreception of mole-rats, even if these phenomenal characters do not play enough of roles 1-6. I suggested that these magnetoreceptive phenomenal characters may still belong to the distinctive kind associated with paradigmatic phenomenal characters.

In the case of the mole-rat, we have an obvious explanation for why magnetoreceptive phenomenal characters fail to play roles 3-6. The explanation is that magnetoreceptive phenomenal characters fail to play roles 3-6, which are all roles referring to *our* relation to phenomenal character, because *we* do not ever experience magnetoreceptive phenomenal characters. To confirm that these facts are crucial to the explanation, suppose that we were to receive sophisticated neural and perceptual upgrades giving us the capacity to sense magnetic fields in just the way that mole-rats do, and to thereby have just the kinds of magnetoreceptive experiences that mole-rats have. If we were able to experience magnetoreceptive phenomenal characters in this way, then presumably magnetoreceptive phenomenal characters *would* then play enough of roles 3-6.

But no explanation of this sort will apply to the case of perceived objects, events, and states, nor to properties of being a distinctive relation to them. For we already do perceive particulars, and we already are, in many cases at least, able to introspectively identify them and our perceptual relations to them. So we have every reason to think that *if* perceived particulars, or properties of being a distinctive relation to perceived particulars, were ever among the

phenomenal characters of perceptual experiences, *then* they would play enough of roles 3-6. Yet they do not play enough of roles 3-6. You can see where *modus tollens* takes us from there.

I do wish to expose my flank here. I have issued an explanatory challenge: supposing that perceived objects, states, or events, or properties of being relations to them are perceptual phenomenal characters, I have asked my opponent to explain why they never play enough of roles 1-6. And I have eliminated the answer to that challenge that strikes me as most promising. But I admit that, in principle, there may be some other good explanation, submerged in the depths, for why they do not play enough of roles 1-6. I leave an open invitation to my opponent to bring it to the surface.

Until she does, however, I will maintain that perceived objects, events, and states, as well as properties of being a distinctive relation towards them, are never perceptual phenomenal characters.

## 6. Against phenomenal particularism, part 2

### 6.1. Groundwork

Things are quite different when it comes to perceived property-instantiations. For I have argued that scarlet\* plays all of roles 3-6, and so I must admit that particular instantiations of scarlet\* also play all of roles 3-6. For example, insofar as there is an explanatory gap about how scarlet\* could be nothing more than a certain physical property, then there must also be an explanatory gap about how this particular instantiation of scarlet\* could be nothing more than a particular instantiation of that same physical property.

Moreover, I have said little about what scarlet\* is, except that it is a property. I have therefore left open two possibilities that will be salient to the phenomenal particularist.



*Possibility 1:* Scarlet\* is the property of being a distinctive relation to some perceived property. E.g., perhaps scarlet\* is the property of seeing scarlet. [I need to figure out what to say about this.]

*Possibility 2:* Scarlet\* is a perceived property. E.g., perhaps scarlet\* is just the color scarlet, or perhaps it is some distinct appearance property that is intimately associated with the color scarlet.<sup>44</sup> In this case, particular instantiations of scarlet\* are perceived property-instantiations, and they play all of roles 1-6. Does it not follow that some perceived particulars are perceptual phenomenal characters?

That does not follow; in particular, it does not follow that these perceived property-instantiations are perceptual phenomenal characters. For the definition, again, is that a phenomenal character is anything that belongs to the *relevant kind* associated with the entities that play enough of roles 1-6. Because the definition appeals to a kind, the definition allows that an entity might play all of roles 1-6 but still not be a phenomenal character, in the same way that an entity might be wet, transparent, and potable but still not be water. So what we must do is consider what *kind* of entity a phenomenal character is, bearing in mind that the paradigms of phenomenal character are all properties.

Before we do that, it is worth observing that properties and property-instantiations behave quite differently in some respects. It is usually thought that properties are repeatable in a way that property-instantiations are not; it is sometimes thought that properties are abstract in a way that property-instantiations are not; and it is usually thought that property-instantiations are spatiotemporally located in a way that properties are not. (You might still take properties might be spatiotemporally located *in a very different way* from property-

---

<sup>44</sup> Cite.

instantiations, e.g., by thinking that a property is spatiotemporally located wherever all of its instantiations are spatiotemporally located.)

So given that phenomenal characters form a kind, and given that properties and property-instantiations behave very differently in some respects, we should at least be able to see that there is space for the idea that scarlet\* is a phenomenal character but that particular instantiations of scarlet\* are not phenomenal characters.

But even if there is space for this idea, you might wonder why it matters. If scarlet\* is a phenomenal character, then what could be the point of denying that particular instantiations of scarlet\* are also phenomenal characters? Well, here is one interesting thing that we can say if we deny this. Suppose that first I see a scarlet plate, and later I hallucinate a scarlet plate (as if from the same perspective and under the same environmental conditions). Then we might say that my perceptual experience and my merely hallucinatory experience have exactly the same phenomenal characters – we might say that the phenomenal character of each experience is just the properties that I perceive, such as scarlet.

But we cannot say this if we hold that a phenomenal character of my perceptual experience is the particular *instantiation* of scarlet that I perceive. For when I hallucinate, I do not perceive any particular instantiation of scarlet. So we might instead say that my perceptual experience has an instantiation of scarlet as a phenomenal character, while my hallucinatory experience just has the property of scarlet as a phenomenal character, or perhaps has no color-related phenomenal character at all.

Thus, it is intelligible to affirm that perceived properties are phenomenal characters while denying that perceived property-instantiations are phenomenal characters. And it matters whether we deny this, insofar as it affects what we can say about the phenomenal characters of perceptual and hallucinatory experiences. What I propose to do, then, is to look

for an independent test of the idea that particular instantiations of scarlet\* are phenomenal characters.

## 6.2. The test

To get a sense of the test that I have in mind, set aside property-instantiations for a moment and just think about the following two properties:

Property **F**: The property of *being scarlet\* and round\**.

Property **G**: The property of *being scarlet\* and existing on a Tuesday*.

I find it very plausible that F is a phenomenal character, but G is not. The difference seems to be this. F is *built*, so to speak, from two properties – scarlet\* and round\* – each of which is a phenomenal character in its own right, and so F inherits its status as a phenomenal character from these more basic phenomenal characters.<sup>45</sup> But G is built from two properties – scarlet\* and existing on a Tuesday – only one of which is a phenomenal character. The other property, the property of existing on a Tuesday, is just a bit of added junk.

What is interesting is that G will still play most of roles 1-6. For example, it will still play the explanatory gap role, the missing knowledge role, the conceivable inversion role, and the conceivable absence role. But it will play these roles *only because scarlet\* itself plays roles 1-6*. And once we factor out the way in which scarlet\* itself plays these roles, there is no further contribution that the property of existing on a Tuesday makes towards playing these roles.

---

<sup>45</sup> You might also think that there is an extra phenomenal element associated with experiencing scarlet\* and round\* *together*. It is fine with me if you want to make this addition.

Now let us once more consider instantiations of scarlet\*. I grant that these will play enough of roles 1-6, simply because the property scarlet\* itself plays enough of these roles. But, as the example of property G has made clear, that is not enough to show that particular instantiations of scarlet\* are themselves phenomenal characters. A better test is to factor out the contribution of scarlet\* itself towards playing roles 1-6, and then to see whether property-instantiations of scarlet\* make any further contributions towards playing roles 1-6.

I suggest that they do not. Return to:

3. The explanatory gap role: We seem unable to understand how it could be nothing more than one or more non-phenomenally conceived entities.

Let us factor out the contribution of scarlet\* itself towards playing role 3 by supposing that I understand exactly what the property of scarlet\* is. For concreteness, let us suppose that scarlet\* is just a certain physical surface reflectance property **SR**. (This supposition is meant to be maximally friendly to the phenomenal particularist, since SR is a good candidate for a perceived property.) And let us suppose that I understand exactly how scarlet\* could be identical to SR. A final supposition: suppose that I know all about the physical nature of this particular instantiation of SR, including its haecceitistic nature, if such there be. Can I then understand how this instantiation of scarlet\* could just be identical to this instantiation of SR, or is there an explanatory gap here?

I cannot find a gap. Once I understand how the property of scarlet\* could be identical to the physical property SR, and once I know all about particular instantiations of SR, then I cannot find any further challenge in explaining how this particular instantiation of scarlet\* could be identical to this particular instantiation of SR. For example, there is no problem of

reconciling the haecceitistic nature of this instantiation of scarlet\* with the haecceitistic nature of this instantiation of SR, if such there be, because my experience does not seem to reveal to me the haecceitistic nature of this instantiation of scarlet\*. My experience seems only to reveal the nature of the property of scarlet\*.<sup>46</sup>

Now let us try the same test for properties of being a distinctive relation to a perceived particular – e.g., the property of being a visual perception of this instantiation of scarlet\*. Suppose that I understand exactly what it is to perceive the property, *simpliciter*, of scarlet\*, and for concreteness let us continue to imagine that scarlet\* is identical to SR. Is there any remaining explanatory gap between the property of being a visual perception of this instantiation of scarlet\* and the property of being a visual perception of this instantiation of SR? For exactly the same reasons as before, I cannot find any. Once I understand how a visual perception of scarlet\* could be identical to a visual perception of SR, and once I understand the nature of particular instantiations of SR, then I can understand how the property of being a visual perception of *this instantiation* of scarlet\* can be identical to the property of being a visual perception of *this instantiation* of SR.

In sum, insofar as there even *seems* to be an explanatory gap, it is an explanatory gap at the level of properties like scarlet\*. Once that gap is closed, there does not seem to be any additional gap at the level of property-instantiations. Indeed, once we are careful to factor out the contribution made by properties, *simpliciter*, in playing roles 3-6, it should be equally

---

<sup>46</sup> This is my response to Fish (2008), who sometimes seems to claim that a certain version of phenomenal particularism can solve the explanatory gap problem (e.g., p. 174). I say that the explanatory gap problem does not arise in the first place with respect to perceived particulars or relations to perceived particulars; it arises with respect to entities like scarlet\*, whatever those might be.

To be fair, at other times Fish seems to be discussing perceived *properties* rather than perceived property-*instantiations*, and if that is his proposed solution, then I need not object to it.

obvious that property-instantiations, and properties of being a distinctive relation to property-instantiations, also fail to play any of these roles. I will not bore you by rehearsing the same considerations again.

For this reason, I hold that perceived property-instantiations, as well as properties of being a distinctive relation to perceived property-instantiations, are never phenomenal characters. And in the previous section, I defended a parallel conclusion about perceived objects, events, and states. Putting these conclusions together, I say that phenomenal particularism is false.

## 7. Are there any phenomenal characters?

Suppose that I am right when I maintain that phenomenal particularism is false. Still, those who have wanted to champion phenomenal particularism – especially those who, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, founded naïve realism<sup>47</sup> – might wonder whether this conclusion *matters*.

Well, the conclusion matters as long as phenomenal characters exist. For it is built into my proposed definition that if phenomenal characters exist then they form a kind, and it is a central task in any area of philosophy to discover what kinds exist.

But that makes it obvious how my opponent can resist: she can embrace **phenomenal eliminativism**, the view that phenomenal characters do not exist. Such an opponent would insist that we can explain all that there is to explain – e.g., about perception, illusion, and hallucination – without ever referring to phenomenal character, in my sense of the term.

---

<sup>47</sup> I am thinking primarily of Michael Martin and John Campbell.

My opponent, if she takes this line, agrees with me that phenomenal particularism is false. But she disagrees with me about the way in which it is false. I hold that phenomenal particularism is false because perceptual phenomenal characters are identical to entities that are not perceived particulars or properties of being a distinctive relation to perceived particulars, whereas she holds that phenomenal particularism is false because perceptual phenomenal characters do not exist. That is a large and important difference, for if my opponent is right – if perceptual phenomenal characters do not exist – then it is hardly of much interest what perceptual phenomenal characters are.

Moreover, suppose that this opponent is a naïve realist of the canonical sort. Then she might seem to get everything that she wants. She can continue to take the founding representationalists as the villains, insofar as she takes them to be theorizing about something, namely phenomenal character, that does not exist. And she can continue to take herself to be the hero, insofar as she is theorizing about the entities – perceived particulars, and properties of being a distinctive relation to perceived particulars – that do all of the explanatory work that there is to be done.

But how precisely will my opponent argue that phenomenal characters do not exist? She might wish to do so by suggesting that there is nothing that plays enough of roles 1-6 – but then I will simply refer her back to §4, where I argued in detail that certain entities, like scarlet\*, play *all* of roles 1-6. Better, then, for her to argue that these entities simply do not form a kind; they are just an arbitrary collection, a grab-bag.<sup>48</sup> If my opponent wishes to pursue phenomenal eliminativism, then that is her best method of pursuit.

---

<sup>48</sup> For example, Kennedy (2009) suggests that phenomenal character “does not cut conscious subjectivity at the joints” (p. 600), and Genone (2016, p. 13) raises a similar worry. Do note, however, that in both cases the worry is driven by the *stipulative assumption* that phenomenal characters are properties of experiences, for Kennedy and Genone both think that what cuts conscious subjectivity at the joints are not properties of experiences. But I have dropped the

It seems to me that this method is not attractive, however. For one thing, consider the various influential theories of phenomenal character. These theories are *very different*. They might take phenomenal characters to include any of the following: sense data, other non-physical entities, perceived properties of ordinary physical entities, perceptual contents of a distinctive sort, or neural properties associated with perception in a distinctive way. But all of these influential theories of phenomenal character agree on the point that phenomenal characters form a kind. On some of these theories, such as the sense-datum theory, phenomenal characters form a special *ontic* kind. But on every one of these theories, phenomenal characters form a *psychological* kind.

Take for example the view that phenomenal characters are perceived properties. On this view, there is nothing ontically special about phenomenal characters. There are some properties that just so happen to be perceived, and those properties, while they are being perceived, are phenomenal characters. But as this kind of view has standardly been developed, there *is* something psychologically important about phenomenal characters. For the view takes the properties that a subject perceives to play a special psychological role for her while she is perceiving them, a role that is obviously not played by any properties that she is not then perceiving. The role is analogous to the role played by the propositions that a subject *knows* or *believes*, as opposed to the propositions towards which that subject has no doxastic attitude.

This view can also take perceived properties to play a psychological role that is different from the psychological role played by perceived particulars. For example, the view can use perceived properties alone to explain facts about what a (rational) subject can or cannot perceptually discriminate. The idea would be that *without relying on background knowledge or*

---

stipulative assumption that phenomenal characters are properties of experiences. Thus, this worry does not apply to phenomenal characters *as I am understanding them*.



*contextual clues*, a subject can perceptually discriminate two entities just in case she perceives them to have different properties. That is why a subject can perceptually discriminate a scarlet plate from an emerald plate, but why she cannot perceptually discriminate one scarlet plate from a distinct but intrinsically identical scarlet plate.<sup>49</sup>

Of course, it is possible that all of the standard influential theories of phenomenal character are wrong, and so it is possible that phenomenal characters do not form even a psychological kind. But the burden is surely on the theorist who takes this view to provide some evidence for it. All the more so, since it is very *prima facie* plausible that phenomenal characters form at least a psychological kind. For example, it is very *prima facie* plausible that roles 3-6 are symptoms of an important psychological phenomenon, and so it is very *prima facie* plausible that the entities that play those roles are associated with a distinctive psychological kind.

## 8. A conjecture

The central argument of this paper is now complete, but I wish to advance a conjecture that might shine more light on the nature and importance of phenomenal characters. The conjecture is this:

The **revelation conjecture**: Introspection alone seems to reveal to us the very nature of any phenomenal character.

---

<sup>49</sup> For more on this idea, see [Author's Work C].

To see why this conjecture is an appealing one, look again at something scarlet and introspectively attend to scarlet\*. It has seemed to many philosophers, and I hope it will seem to you, that the very nature of scarlet\* is *right there*, laid bare to the mind. Do notice, though, that the conjecture is just about how things introspectively seem; you can accept the conjecture without thinking that the nature of scarlet\* really is revealed to you, and indeed without accepting that any such thing as a nature even exists.

This conjecture is hardly new.<sup>50</sup> But it is important for a number of reasons.

First, it lets us neatly explain why phenomenal characters so often play roles 3-6. For notice that these roles – the roles that implicate explanatory gaps, missing knowledge, conceivable absences, and conceivable inversions – all have to do with an apparent disconnect between phenomenal characters, as they seem to be according to introspection, and anything conceived via other means, such as the means of scientific inquiry. And the revelation conjecture posits precisely such an apparent disconnect. The idea is that the nature of (e.g.) scarlet\*, as it is apparently revealed to us in introspection, seems to be manifestly disconnected from anything that we can conceive non-phenomenally.<sup>51</sup>

Second, the revelation conjecture is important because it gives us another reason for thinking that phenomenal characters form a psychological kind, whether or not they also form an ontic kind. For if phenomenal characters seem to have their very natures revealed to us in introspection, then whether or not this seeming is correct, we will presumably be disposed to treat phenomenal characters in certain distinctive ways – e.g., in reasoning.

And finally, the revelation conjecture is important because it gives us an additional reason to resist phenomenal particularism. The reason is that perceived particulars, and

---

<sup>50</sup> See Johnston (1992) and (2002), although he does not much use the term “phenomenal character”; see also Chalmers (1996).

<sup>51</sup> On this point I follow Chalmers (1996, p. 153).

properties of being a distinctive relation to them, do not even seem to have their natures revealed to us in introspection. Look at a plate and introspect. It will not seem to be made manifest to you *what it is* to be that plate. We can test this claim by considering whether your experience bears in any immediate way on various hypotheses about the nature of that plate. Your experience does not seem incompatible with the hypotheses that the plate is, by its nature: a human-made artifact, a gigantic but fundamental particle, an infinitely divisible crystal, or a Martian in repose. You have very good independent evidence for the first hypothesis and against the rest, but the phenomenal character of your experience does not much bear on the matter – except, perhaps, by revealing various properties of the plate that a hypothesis about its nature must accommodate.

Nor does introspection seem to put us in a position to know the natures of the perceived property-instantiations. To be sure, you may think that introspection seems to put us in a position to know the natures of the perceived *properties* – I have argued that introspection seems to put us in a position to know the nature of scarlet\*, and you might think that scarlet\* is just the color scarlet. But our current question is whether introspection seems to reveal *more* than that – whether it seems to reveal to us the natures of perceived *property-instantiations*, insofar as that goes beyond the natures of perceived *properties themselves*.

Note that it is a live philosophical question whether property-instantiations have natures that go beyond the natures of the properties themselves. Some philosophers say that they do. On this view, what it is to be *this* instantiation of scarlet\* is different from what it is to be *that* instantiation of scarlet\*. The difference might be a difference in the *haecceities* of these distinct instantiations of scarlet\*, or a difference in the *relational profiles* of the distinct instantiations, or something else. But other philosophers say that the nature of any property-instantiation is just the nature of the property itself, so that there is no difference in nature

between different instantiations of the very same property. On this view, what it is to be *this* instantiation of scarlet\* is exactly the same as what it is to be *that* instantiation of scarlet\*.

The crucial point is that I have never seen anyone try to make progress on these metaphysical disputes by appeal to *introspection*. Introspection just seems to remain silent on the matter. Not only does introspection not seem to tell us which specific view is the correct one about the natures of distinct instantiations of scarlet\*, it does not even seem to tell us whether these distinct instantiations of scarlet\* have the same natures or different ones. More precisely, introspection tells us nothing about the nature of an instantiation of scarlet\* *except* insofar as introspection tells us about what it is to be the property of scarlet\*, simpliciter. But on the matter of what, if anything, distinguishes the natures of instantiations of this same property, introspection is mute.

Thus, if the revelation conjecture is correct, then perceived particulars are not phenomenal characters.

I have not given anything like a comprehensive case for the revelation conjecture. I have just mentioned a few reasons to accept it: it is simple, it is not especially committal, and it is explanatorily powerful. But I suggest that the conjecture brings into sharper focus how I am thinking about things, and especially why I think that the falsity of phenomenal particularism is important. Still, for those unmoved by the revelation conjecture, I am happy to rely solely on the arguments of the previous sections.

## 9. Conclusion

The hurdles in front of my opponent are high. Until such a time as she may clear them, I will stand by these convictions:

1. *Phenomenal particularism is false.* That is, no perceptual phenomenal characters are properties of being a distinctive relation to perceived particulars, nor are any of them just identical to perceived particulars – at least, not if we use the historically influential sense of “phenomenal character” discussed here.
2. *The falsity of phenomenal particularism is important.* For we have every reason to think that phenomenal characters exist and form a psychological kind.<sup>52</sup>

I take that to be real progress. By getting some clarity about the concept of phenomenal character, we have also gotten some much-needed clarity about the metaphysical nature of phenomenal character itself.

---

<sup>52</sup> And perhaps also an ontic kind.

## REFERENCES

[Author's Work A]

[Author's Work B]

[Author's Work C]

Ayer, A. (1956). *The Problem of Knowledge*. London: Macmillan.

Block, N. (1996). "Mental paint and mental latex." *Philosophical Issues* 7: 19-49.

Brewer, B. (2011). *Perception and Its Objects*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Byrne, A. (2009). "Experience and content." *Philosophical Quarterly* 59 (236): 429-451.

Campbell, J. (2002). *Reference and Consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Campbell, J. (2011). "Consciousness and reference." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind*, eds. B. McLaughlin, A. Beckermann, and S. Walter (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Carruthers, P. and Veillet, B. (2011). "The case against cognitive phenomenology." In *Cognitive Phenomenology*, eds. T. Bayne and M. Montague (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 35-56.

Chalmers, D. (1996). *The Conscious Mind*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Chalmers, D. (2006). "Perception and the fall from Eden." In *Perceptual Experience*, eds. T. Gendler and J. Hawthorne (Oxford University Press), pp. 49-125.

Crane, T. (2006). "Is there a perceptual relation?" In *Perceptual Experience*, eds. T. Gendler and J. Hawthorne (Oxford University Press), pp. 126-146.

Davies, M. (1992). "Perceptual content and local supervenience." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 66: 21-45.

Dennett, D. (1988). "Quining Qualia." Reprinted in *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. D. Chalmers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 226-246.

Dretske, F. (1995). *Naturalizing the Mind*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Dretske, F. (2003). "Experience as representation." *Philosophical Issues* 13: 67-82.

Fish, W. (2008). "Relationalism and the problems of consciousness." *Teorema* 27 (3): 167-80.

Fish, W. (2009). *Perception, Hallucination, and Illusion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Genone, J. (2014). "Appearance and illusion." *Mind* 123 (490): 339-376.

Genone, J. (2016). "Recent work on naïve realism." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (1): 1-24.

Gomes, A. (2017). "Naïve realism in Kantian phrase." *Mind* 126: 529-578.

Hall, E. (1961.) *Our Knowledge of Fact and Value*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Harman, G. (1990). "The intrinsic quality of experience." *Philosophical Perspectives* 4: 31-52.

Hellie, B. (2007). "Factive phenomenal characters." *Philosophical Perspectives* 21: 259-306.

Jackson, F. (1982). "Epiphenomenal qualia." *Philosophical Quarterly* 32: 127-36.

Levine, J. (1983). "Materialism and qualia: the explanatory gap." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64: 354-361.

Lewis, D. (1970). "How to define theoretical terms." *Journal of Philosophy* 67 (13): 427-446.

Lewis, D. (1972). "Psychophysical and theoretical identifications." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 50 (3): 249-258.

Logue, H. (2012). "Why naïve realism?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 112 (2): 211-237.

Lycan, W. (1996). *Consciousness and Experience*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Martin, M. (2002). "The transparency of experience." *Mind and Language* 17 (4): 376-425.

Martin, M. (2004). "The limits of self-awareness." *Philosophical Studies* 120: 37-89.

- Martin, M. (2006). "On being alienated." In *Perceptual Experience*, eds. T. Gendler and J. Hawthorne (Oxford University Press), pp. 354-410.
- Logue, H. (2012). "What should the naïve realist say about total hallucinations?" *Philosophical Perspectives* 26: 173-199.
- Masrour, F. (2011). "Is perceptual phenomenology thin?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 83 (2): 366-397.
- McClelland, T. (2016). "Gappiness and the case for liberalism about phenomenal properties." *Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (264): 536-558.
- McDowell, J. (1994). *Mind and World*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Millar, B. (2014). "The phenomenological problem of perception." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 88 (3): 625-654.
- Nagel, T. (1974). "What is it like to be a bat?" *Philosophical Review* 83 (4): 435-450.
- Pautz, A. (2009). "What are the contents of experiences?" *Philosophical Quarterly* 59 (236): 483-507.
- Schellenberg, S. (forthcoming). *The Unity of Perception*.
- Sellars, W. (1975). "The adverbial theory of the objects of sensation." *Metaphilosophy* 6: 144-160.
- Shoemaker, S. (1982). "The inverted spectrum." *Journal of Philosophy* 79: 357-381.
- Siegel, S. (2010). *The Contents of Visual Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smart, J. (1959). "Sensations and brain processes." *Philosophical Review* 68 (2): 141-156.
- Snowdon, P. (2010). "On the what-it-is-likeness of experience." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48 (1): 8-27.
- Soteriou, M. (2016). *Disjunctivism*. New York: Routledge.
- Sturgeon, S. (2008). "Disjunctivism about visual experience." In *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*, eds. A. Haddock and F. Macpherson (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 112-143.
- Sundström, P. (2017). "How physicalists can – and cannot – explain the seeming "absurdity" of physicalism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (online first).
- Tye, M. (1995). *Ten Problems of Consciousness: A Representational Theory of the Phenomenal Mind*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Tye, M. (2009). *Consciousness Revisited: Materialism without Phenomenal Concepts*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.