A Higher-Order Account of the Phenomenology of Particularity

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Abstract

Many theorists maintain that perceptual experience exhibits the what is often called the phenomenology of particularity: that in perceptual experience it phenomenally seems that there are particular things. Some urge that this phenomenology demands special accounts of perception on which particulars somehow constitute perceptual experience, including versions of relationalism, on which perception is a relation between perceivers and particular perceived objects, or complex forms of representationalism, on which perception exhibits demonstrative or special particular-involving types of content. I argue here that no such account required. I develop and defend a novel account of such phenomenology, grounded in the higher-order theory of consciousness. In short, this view holds that the phenomenology of particularity arises because suitable higher-order states make it appear to one that one is in perceptual relations to particulars, even if perception is not in any way constituted by particulars. I argue that this account has many advantages and avoids problems that other theories of such phenomenology face.

Keywords: particularity; higher-order theory; representationalism; relationalism; phenomenology

1. Introduction

My main goal here is to develop and defend a novel account of the phenomenology of particularity, an account grounded in a standard version of a higher-order ("HO") theory of consciousness (e.g., Rosenthal 2005; Weisberg 2011). When you see your best friend, you plainly see a particular individual—and not simply something or other that looks a certain way. Perceptual experience thus exhibits what one might call *particularity* in this uncontroversial way. But many philosophers of perception also maintain that particulars are often or even always part of the phenomenology of—or, to use Nagel's (1974) expression, what it is like to for subjects to have—perceptual experiences (e.g., Soteriou 2000; Martin 2002; Schellenberg 2010; 2018; French & Gomes 2016; 2019). In other words, in having a perceptual experience, it phenomenally seems to a subject that a specific particular, such as an external object or property instantiation, is present. Following Schellenberg (2018), I call this feature of perceptual experience the phenomenology of particularity or *phenomenological particularity*.

Many theorists maintain that this type of phenomenology demands special accounts of perceptual experience on which particulars somehow constitute perceptual experience, such as versions of relationalism, on which perception is a relation between perceivers and particular perceived objects (e.g., Martin 2002; 2004; French & Gomes 2016; 2019), or complex varieties of representationalism on which perception exhibits demonstrative or special particular-involving types of content (e.g., Soteriou 2000; Schellenberg 2010; 2018).

I argue here that no such account on which particulars constitute perception is required to explain phenomenological particularity—and I lay out a version of HO theory that explains it, while

avoiding several problems that other theories of such phenomenology face.[1] HO theory holds that one has a perceptual experience just in case one appears to one that one is perceiving via a suitable HO state. And I argue that suitable HO states can make it appear to one that one is in perceptual relations to particulars, even if perception is not in any way constituted by particulars. In that way, this account of phenomenological particularity is compatible with virtually any theory of perception.

While I believe that a range of considerations support HO theory (see, e.g., Rosenthal 2005; Weisberg 2011) and that pressing objections to the view have been met (for a review of recent objections to HO theory with replies, see, e.g., Berger & Brown 2021), my goal is not to motivate or defend HO theory *per se*, but to propose a version of it that can explain phenomenological particularity. However, that this view can explain clearly such phenomenology is an advantage of the account—and so it is at least preferable in that regard to other versions of HO theory currently available.

After setting out some details about what exactly must be explained by a theory of phenomenological particularity in Section 2, I explain why a HO-theoretic account of such phenomenology is warranted in Section 3. I then argue in Sections 4 and 5 that there is a way to unpack the HO theory of consciousness to provide an explanation of phenomenological particularity. Since I conclude that considerations of phenomenological particularity do not cut ice

[1] The phenomenology of particularity is arguably related to other sorts of perceptual phenomenology, such as what some theorists have called 'phenomenal presence' or 'presentational character' (see, e.g., Schellenberg 2018: 17, fn. 11). And some HO theorists have offered accounts of that latter (e.g., Berger & Brown 2021, section 5.2). But it is unclear exactly how phenomenological particularity and presentational character relate—and the account developed here differs from previously proposed HO-theoretic accounts of other aspects of perceptual phenomenology.

between theories of perception, I briefly conclude in Section 6 by drawing some lessons about how debates about phenomenology may drive debates about the structure of perception in light of the contributions of consciousness.

2. The debate over particularity

To understand this HO-theoretic account and its advantages, it will be helpful to begin with a brief tour of the recent debate over phenomenological particularity.[2]

Within the contemporary philosophy of perception, there are broadly two approaches to the nature of perceptual experience. On the one hand, standard versions of relationalism hold that perceptual experience is fundamentally a relation between perceivers and perceived objects (e.g., Martin 2004; Logue 2012). On such views, what it is like to visually experience a red tomato, for example, is determined by one's being suitably visually related to a red tomato. On the other hand, varieties of representationalism hold that the phenomenology of perceptual experience is explained

[2] At the outset, I note that some theorists recently distinguish two types of such phenomenology. Following French and Gomes (2019), we should distinguish between a perceptual experience's exhibiting what they call *generic* phenomenological particularity, or the fact that it may perceptually appear to one that some particular or other is present, from its exhibiting *specific* phenomenological particularity, or the fact that it may perceptually appear to one that a specific particular is present. When you consciously see your best friend, it does not merely visually seem that someone or other is present. Your experience does not exhibit mere generic particularity. Rather, it visually seems that *that very person* is present. Your experience has specific particularity. Going forward, references to phenomenological particularity are to specific phenomenological particularity.

by its representational properties (e.g., Harman 1990; Tye 2000). On standard versions of representationalism, what it is like to visually experience a red tomato is a matter of one's suitably visually representing various features of a tomato such as its redness.

Relationalists often maintain that the view is particularly well-suited (pun intended) to explain phenomenological particularity. Such views hold:

> **Standard relationalism**: It phenomenally seems to subject S that there is a particular object O (equivalently, S has a perceptual experience E as of O, or S seems to be consciously aware of O) iff S is suitably perceptually related to O.

Since standard relationalism holds, for example, that a particular red tomato is literally a constituent of a visual experience of it, it would seem obvious that one's experience exhibits such phenomenology.

Typical versions of representationalism, by contrast, strike many as unable to accommodate phenomenological particularity (see, e.g., Soteriou 2000; French & Gomes 2016; 2019). In general, such views maintain:

> **Standard representationalism**: It phenomenally seems to subject S that there is a particular object O (equivalently, S has a perceptual experience E as of O, or S seems to be consciously aware of O) iff S suitably perceptually represents O.

Representationalism comes in many forms, depending on how the relevant perceptual representations are understood. According to versions of what we can call *generalist representationalism* (e.g., Harman 1990; Hill 2022), the contents of perception are, as Hill recently puts it, "always

general rather than particular, in the sense that they can be fully captured by existentially quantified propositions…" (2022: 210). The problem with such forms of representationalism, however, is that if the contents of experience are something like <there is an object with such and such features>, then it is hard to see how experiences could make it phenomenally appear that particulars are present.

To accommodate phenomenological particularity, some representationalists instead propose versions of what we can call *complex representationalism*, which hold that perceptual states have demonstrative or special particular-involving types of content. Schellenberg (2010; 2018), for example, posits that perceptual experience has a type of "gappy" *de re* Fregean content that takes particulars as components in veridical cases. More specifically, she maintains that accurate perceptual experience has content of the form: "(e_P)<MOP(o), MOP(P)> where MOP(o) specifies a particular mode of presentation of an object and MOP(P) specifies a particular mode of presentation of a property P" (2010: 35). Alternatively, Millar (2014) proposes what he calls the "direct causal content view," which builds on Searle's (1983) well-known self-referential account of perceptual content. On Searle's view, an experience's content refers to that state itself as that which is caused by whatever is perceived. On Millar's modification of that view, phenomenological particularity is best explained not by particular-involving or singular content, but by the fact that perception refers demonstratively to itself as being *directly* caused by particulars; the contents of perception have something like the form: <there is an X at location Y and this experience directly causally depends on X's being at Y> (2014: 648).

I argue shortly that these efforts to explain phenomenological particularity in terms of complex perceptual contents face various issues that are avoided by the HO-theory-based account that I develop here. At the outset, however, I note that one might not think that any special account—relationalist, complex representationalist, HO-theoretic, or otherwise—is needed to

explain such phenomenology. This is because, following Schellenberg (2018: 17ff), we must distinguish between whether perceptual experience only makes it *phenomenally appear* that there are particulars—whether it exhibits what she calls phenomenological particularity—from whether perceptual experience *in fact* constitutively involves particulars—that is, whether it exhibits what she instead calls *relational particularity*.

Though notions are often run together in the literature, it may seem that the most straightforward explanation of phenomenological particularity is that perceptual experience exhibits relational particularity—and this, it seems, is what most relationalists and complex representationalists assume. But, as Schellenberg (2018: 17) observes, phenomenological particularity does not entail relational particularity. Indeed, Schellenberg urges that phenomenological particularity can be explained by virtually any theory of perception, including generalist representationalism. She argues, for example, that the mere fact that a perceptual experience is somehow intentionally directed at particulars is sufficient for it to exhibit phenomenological particularity. Of course, if one were convinced that generalist representationalism can and does explain such phenomenology, then there would be no issue to address here.

It is not clear, however, that phenomenological particularity can be explained by any account of perceptual experience. To see why, consider that some generalists representationalists also endorse what we may call *phenomenological generalism*, which denies that there is phenomenological particularity in the first place (e.g., Mehta 2014; Mehta & Ganson 2016; Hill 2022). If any theory of perceptual experience could account for phenomenological particularity, then there would be no reason for generalists representationalists to endorse such a strong position; the debate should

regard only relational particularity. But generalist representationalists often insist on phenomenological generalism too.[3]

While I am drawn to a type of generalist representationalism, it is not clear to me whether phenomenological generalism is really coherent (see also, e.g., Schellenberg 2018: 17). Although debates about phenomenology are often notoriously difficult to settle (for an overview, see, e.g., Schwitzgebel 2011), it is hard to see what an experience as of something, but not as of some specific particular or other, would be like. Fortunately, the denial of phenomenological particularity is not only questionable, but also, as I argue shortly, unnecessary.[4]

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[3] Since phenomenological and relational particularity are often conflated, perhaps some generalist representationalists, such as Harman (1990), mean to deny only that there is relational particularity. But it is natural to see how generalist representationalism fits with phenomenological generalism—and some, such as Hill (2022), explicitly defend this combination of views. Indeed, some phenomenological generalists even endorse relational particularity. Mehta (2014: 321ff), for example, is clear that particulars do not constitute perceptual phenomenology, but holds that they are nonetheless *non-phenomenal* parts of perceptual experiences.

[4] Phenomenological generalists have offered several reasons to deny that particulars appear in the character of experience. Mehta (2014: 318ff; Mehta & Ganson 2016), for example, imagines a visual experience of seeing a glass of red wine on a table and a tactile experience of that same glass of wine in one's lap. He argues that the phenomenological particularist must maintain that there would be *some* phenomenal similarity between these two experiences, as they involve the same particular, though there would seem to be none. Phenomenological particularists have replied to such cases, however, urging either that a commitment to phenomenological particularity need not predict any

In sum, while I agree with most relationalists and complex representationalists that there is phenomenological particularity, I also agree with Schellenberg that no such view that invokes relational particularity is *required* to explain it. But I disagree with Schellenberg that *standard* forms of generalist representationalism do explain it. In the next section, then, I lay the groundwork for an account of phenomenological particularity which is compatible with a form of generalist representationalism, explaining why we need a theory of consciousness such as HO theory in the first place.

3. Theories of perception and theories of consciousness

As noted, varieties of representationalism and relationalism are typically put forward as theories of perceptual *experience* (see respectively, e.g., Harman 1990; Martin 2004). There is, however, much evidence that perception can and often does also occur outside of consciousness, as in instances of blindsight or studies of masked priming (for an overview, see, e.g., Dehaene *et al.* 2006). In cases of blindsight, people with damage to visual cortex report being unable to see items in their

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phenomenal similarities between such experiences or that there are at least some phenomenal similarities between them (see, e.g., French & Gomes 2016; Anaya & Clarke 2019). For reasons of space, I cannot adjudicate these debates here, except to say that I think denying the *datum* of phenomenological particularity is a significant theoretical cost.

environment, though they are nonetheless above-chance at discriminating such items, which suggests that they see, but do not *consciously see* those items (e.g., Weiskrantz 1986).[5]

If perception can occur outside of consciousness, then we must thus distinguish two distinct types of theory: *theories of perception*, which describe the nature of perception whether or not it is conscious, and *theories of consciousness*, which explain why some perceiving is conscious (see also, e.g., Pautz 2010: 333).[6] And there are many theories of the latter type (for a review of several theories, see, e.g., Seth & Bayne 2022).

Varieties of representationalism thus often include both types of theory by admitting of nonconscious perceptual representations. As an illustration, on Tye's (2000) well-known *PANIC* version of representationalism, differences in one's *abstract nonconceptual intentional contents* (the 'ANIC') are the view's account of the nature of perception. A visual experience of a red tomato has

[5] Although a complete account of perception (independent of consciousness) is plainly beyond the scope of this paper, I assume at a minimum that such states are personal-level mental episodes that track items in the environment in modality-specific ways, but of which individuals are unaware and for which there is nothing that it is like to be in them.

[6] One might deny that we need a theory of consciousness distinct from a theory of perception by denying there is nonconscious perception (e.g., Phillips 2021). As others have urged (e.g., Zięba 2019, section 2.2), however, arguments for skepticism about the experimental evidence for nonconscious perception typically depend on assuming questionable techniques for assessing consciousness or fairly demanding conceptions of perception. So, while the current evidence in favor of nonconscious perception may not be dispositive, there are good reasons to think that nonconscious perception will be experimentally vindicated. I thus proceed on the assumption that perception can occur without being conscious.

a reddish, as opposed to a greenish, character because of its particular ANIC. But since such contents can occur without being conscious, Tye also includes an account of consciousness, which is akin to the so-called *global-workspace theory* (e.g., Dehaene *et al.* 2006). Roughly, global-workspace theory holds that a mental state is conscious only if it is made available to or "in" the global workspace, which is a central cortical module that has long-range neural connections to many modules, such as those that that control action or speech—and thus *poised* (the 'P' in Tye's view) for impact on downstream cognition.

Although the idea of nonconscious perception is perhaps more familiar within a representationalist framework, recently some relationalists have similarly proposed extending the relationalist analysis to nonconscious perception too—that is, maintaining that perceptual relations can and often do occur outside of consciousness, which must thus also be paired with a theory of consciousness (see, e.g., Zięba 2019). A relationalist might adopt, for example, a version of global-workspace theory on which a perceptual relation is on its own nonconscious and becomes conscious only if the information encoded in that perceptual relation is made available to the workspace. Varieties of standard representationalism or relationalism are thus better conceived of either as simply theories of the structure of perception which can and must be appended to a theory of consciousness, or as accounts that involve these two (distinct) theoretical elements.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the major theories of consciousness currently available face significant challenges, though considering them here would take us too far afield (for review, see, e.g., Seth & Bayne 2022). Rather, what I argue now is that an independently attractive theory of consciousness is a standard version of HO theory—and that adopting a slightly modified version of it can straightforwardly explain phenomenological particularity.

4. An introduction to HO theory

Accounts of consciousness such as global-workspace theory are so-called *first-order* theories. On such theories, conscious perception does not differ fundamentally from nonconscious perception. Rather, the difference consists in whether or not the actual first-order perceiving exhibits the relevant first-order-theoretic property. On the workspace theory, first-order perception is conscious only if the information that first-order perception carries is available to the workspace.

Proponents of HO theories, by contrast, maintain that consciousness is not a matter of a first-order states' being modulated by some first-order mechanism, but instead consists in one's suitable HO awareness of being in first-order mental conditions.[7]

Although my goal is not to defend HO theory *per se*, I nonetheless provide one reason here why any theorist, relationalist or otherwise, ought to consider it. This reason, which is often cited as one of the central motivations for the view, is what Rosenthal (e.g., 2005: 4) calls *the transitivity principle*. Folk psychology holds that if one is a mental condition, such as perception, but in no way aware of oneself as being in that state, then that mental state is not conscious—there is nothing that it is like for one to be in it. But this claim is the contrapositive of the transitivity principle (which I cast here in terms of perception specifically):

> **Transitivity principle**: A perceptual state P is conscious (equivalently, subject S has a perceptual experience E) only if S is somehow aware of herself as being in P.

[7] In this terminology, a mental state is HO only if it is of, about, or in some way targets another mental condition.

Although some HO views do question or even reject the transitivity principle (e.g., Brown 2015), most HO views typically seek to "implement" the transitivity principle by providing accounts of how it is that we are aware of ourselves as perceiving that is not just necessary but also sufficient for perceptual experience. A major problem with nonstandard versions of HO theory and first-order accounts such as global-workspace theory is that they offer no straightforward way to implement this principle.

HO theorists nonetheless disagree about the nature of the relevant HO states. I largely stay neutral here regarding the nature of these states; call them, whatever they are, *suitable HO states*. Standard versions of HO theory thus hold:

> **Standard HO theory**: A perceptual state P is conscious (equivalently, subject S has a perceptual experience E) iff S is aware of herself as being in P via a suitable HO state H.[8]

So, for example, on Rosenthal's (e.g., 2005) well-known higher-order thought ("HOT") version of HO theory, one is aware of oneself of being in a perceptual state P —that is, P is conscious—just in case one represents oneself as being in P via a suitable HOT, which is an ordinary assertoric thought with a content roughly like <I am in perceptual state P>. Other HO theories posit different mechanisms, such as states of HO perception (e.g., Lycan 1996). Whatever the nature of such HO states, however, most HO theorists agree that to be aware of X as being F—such as when one is aware of *oneself as perceiving*—requires that one suitably represent X as F.

[8] Going forward, I typically drop the 'suitable' and 'standard' modifiers, insofar as all reference to HO states refers to suitable HO states and all reference to HO theory refers to standard versions of it.

One might immediately object that we can explain how we are aware of ourselves as perceiving without requiring that we *represent* ourselves as being in those states via distinct HO states. One might think, for example, that a self-referential account of perceptual content such as Searle's (1983) or Millar's (2014) explains how we are aware of our perceiving in consciousness. But it is unclear that these views successfully implement the transitivity principle. That a perceptual state refers to itself, or refers to itself as a cause, does not, on its own, clearly render one aware of *oneself* as perceiving. Moreover, as other HO theorists have observed (e.g., Rosenthal 2005: 116ff), such views are incapable of distinguishing nonconscious mental states from their conscious counterparts insofar as they hold that all perceiving would involve such self-reference and would thereby be *ipso facto* conscious. I thus assume going forward that the best way to implement the transitivity principle is via suitable HO representation—and that the relevant HO states must be capable of representing individuals as being in mental conditions in the manner that I spell out shortly.

Instead, one might object that, since HO states are varieties of mental representations, HO theory presumes a kind of representationalism. But even though HO states are themselves representational—and though the theory is often paired with accounts of perceptual states on which they too are representations (e.g., Rosenthal 2005; Brown 2015)—HO theory is an account of consciousness, not a theory of the structure of perception. As a result, any philosopher of perception, relationalist or otherwise, may be drawn to a version of the transitivity principle, and thus a version of HO theory, too.

Indeed, if relationalists permit nonconscious perceptual relations, there is a way to read the transitivity principle that is consistent with that view. What is it for perceptual relations to be nonconscious? Yes, it is for there to be nothing that it's like for one to be in those relations. But it is also that one is in no way *aware* of being in those relations. That is to say, I propose that there is a new relational way to read the transitivity principle:

> **Relational transitivity principle**: If subject S is in a perceptual relation R to an object O, but in no way of aware of herself being in R, then R is not conscious; S is thus in a conscious perceptual relation R to O (equivalently, S has a perceptual experience E as of O, or S seems to be consciously aware of O) only if S is aware of herself as being in R.

In turn, there is a form of HO theory, which we can call *HO perceptual relationalism*, that implements this relational transitivity principle:

> **HO perceptual relationalism**: A subject S is in a conscious perceptual relation R to an object O (or, equivalently, S has a perceptual experience E of O, or S seems to be consciously aware of O) just in case S is aware of herself as being in R via a suitable HO state H.[9]

On this combination of views, to visually experience a red tomato is to be aware of oneself via a suitable HO state as being in visual relation to a red tomato.

[9] Although the name 'HO perceptual relationalism' may seem akin to HO-perception theory (e.g., Lycan 1996), it is important to stress that they are distinct. HO-perception theory is an account of the nature of the relevant HO states—namely, that they are perceptual or quasi-perceptual states. In contrast, HO perceptual relationalism is an account of the nature of the first-order perceptual states *represented by* the relevant HO states—namely, that the suitable HO states represent first-order perceptual states as perceptual relations.

There are many reasons to adopt HO perceptual relationalism. On standard versions of HOT theory, for example, HOTs are theorized to describe our mental lives using our *folk-psychological conceptions* of mentality (e.g., Rosenthal 2005: 61, fn. 40). If a HOT's content is <I see a red tomato>, the state of seeing is represented using our ordinary concept of seeing. And, as many have suggested, it is arguably part of our ordinary conception of perception that it puts us in some sort of direct contact with or relation to the mind-independent world. That our folk conception of perception holds that it is direct in some way is often cited as a major motivation for varieties of relationalism, which is also often called *naïve realism* precisely because it allegedly captures this aspect of our commonsense view (e.g., Martin 2004: 38ff).

What I now argue that another major reason to prefer this HO perceptual relationalism is that it explains the phenomenological particularity that views that accept relational particularity are posited to explain. Moreover, I urge that this account can explain such phenomenology wholly in terms of HO states with ordinary generalized content. That is, I aim to solve the puzzle that has bedeviled generalist theories of perception: *how to get phenomenological particularity from existentially generalized content*?

5. HO perceptual relationalism and phenomenological particularity

Because HO perceptual relationalism explains phenomenological particularity in terms of contentful states, its account unsurprisingly has much in common with standard versions of (generalist) representationalism. But while the latter views aim to explain the phenomenology in terms of suitable perceptual representations, the former holds that there is phenomenological particularity just in case subjects represent themselves as being in perceptual relations via suitable HO states.

What are the contents of the relevant HO states? I propose they are something like the following existentially generalized contents: $<\exists(x)(R_{IX} \bullet O_x)>$, where 'R' denotes the perceiving relation that relates the perceiver, I, and the perceived object, x, and 'O' is shorthand to denote whatever perceptible features the perceived object may exhibit, such as the property of being red or being a tomato. Of course, a version of HO perceptual relationalism could explain phenomenological particularity if HO states made singular reference to actual first-order perceptual relations as well. But such an account, I argue, is not needed for this purpose; it is at least open that HO contents are wholly general.[10]

We can summarize this account of phenomenological particularity, which we can call *generalist HO perceptual relationalism*, this way:

> **Generalist HO perceptual relationalism:** It phenomenally seems to subject S that there is a particular object O (or, equivalently, S has a perceptual experience E of O, or S seems to be consciously aware of O) iff S is aware of herself as being in a perceptual relation R to O via a suitable HO state H with the content $<\exists(x)(R_{IX} \bullet O_x)>$.[11]

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[10] Because HO states' contents are typically thought to involve the indexical 'I', as I too have it here, one may suspect that their contents are not general. On standard analyses of indexical and demonstrative expressions such as Kaplan's (1989), such elements make singular reference to particulars. It may be, however, that we may offer an eliminativist view about indexical reference in thought that redescribes such apparent instances of 'I' in general terms (e.g., Rosenthal 2012).

[11] I leave open whether or not HO states ever fail to represent perceptual states as relational—that is, if they ever represent things in a generic way. If perceptual experiences sometimes do not or never exhibit phenomenological particularity, then such HO states explain those cases.

On this view, the relevant HO states do not have singular or object-involving contents; rather, if we describe one as perceiving an object, the expression referring to that object would be rendered in the relevant HO content as a predicate.[12] So, for example, the view holds that what it is for it to phenomenally appear that there is a particular red tomato is for one to be suitably aware of oneself as being in a perceptual relation to *something* that is a red tomato.

Despite appealing to content, HO perceptual relationalism's account of the phenomenology of particularity has much in common with standard versions of relationalism's account of it too. This is because both views agree that there is such phenomenology because one is consciously perceptually related to particulars; what they disagree about is what it is to be so consciously related. On standard versions of relationalism, being in a suitable perceptual relation to a particular is necessary and sufficient for perceptual experience. According to HO perceptual relationalism, by contrast, one is in a conscious perceptual relation to a particular just in case one is aware of being perceptually related to a particular via a suitable HO representation.

HO perceptual relationalism thus holds, like standard forms of relationalism, that what phenomenally appears to one is simply what one is consciously related to—that is, the *relatum* of one's (represented) perceptual relation. So, for example, just as standard relationalism maintains that it phenomenally appears to one that there is a particular red tomato just in case one is suitably perceptually related to a tomato, HO perceptual relationalism holds that it phenomenally appears to one that there is a particular red tomato just in case one is suitably aware of oneself as being

[12] This proposal thus echoes the view in the philosophy of language, sometimes referred to as *predicativism*, on which the semantic values of names (for objects) in natural language are predicate-type semantic values (see, e.g., Fara 2015).

perceptually related to a red tomato. And that's because, on the latter view, being so aware of oneself just is *what it is* to be in a conscious perceptual relation to a particular red tomato—for it to phenomenally seem to one that there is *that very red tomato*.

Put another way, just as standard relationalism holds that being in an *actual* perceptual relation to a particular makes it phenomenally appear to one that the particular is present, HO perceptual relationalism holds that it phenomenally appears to one that that there is a particular because one is *apparently* perceptually related—that is, one suitably represents oneself as being perceptually related—to that particular.

Some immediate objections to the account might seem to arise at this point, however, discussions of which will help clarify the proposal.

5.1. Filling out the account

First, one might worry that the view provides no explanation of phenomenological particularity at all, insofar as its seeming to one that one is in a perceptual relation to a particular via a suitable HO state, as HO perceptual relationalism holds, is simply be a restatement of the claim that it phenomenally seems to the subject that a particular is present, which is the *datum* of phenomenological particularity.

To see why this account is not vacuous, however, we must be clear that HO theory in general distinguishes what one seems to be aware of, or what it seems to one that there is, from what one is *consciously* aware of, or what there *phenomenally* seems to be (cf. Rosenthal 2005: 117ff). Since mentality can occur both consciously and not, virtually any theory should draw this distinction. After all, it is reasonable to hold that a person with blindsight is in some way aware, but not

consciously aware, of features of the environment.[13] Accordingly, HO perceptual relationalism holds that, though in having a perceptual experience we are aware of ourselves being in perceptual relations, we are not *consciously* aware of being those relations.

This would make sense. Most would agree that, in ordinary perceptual experience, we are not consciously aware of, much less consciously perceive, our perceptual experiences. Rather, we would seem to be consciously aware of only what we consciously perceive there to be *in virtue of having* those experiences. Relationalists, for example, typically hold that in perceptual experience one is not consciously aware that one is perceptually related to the world and its objects; rather, one is simply consciously perceptually presented with the world and its objects. Indeed, most hold that it is only in *introspection* that we can and do become consciously aware of our experiences. This is why the claim of phenomenological particularity is not that in experience subjects phenomenally seem to be aware of particulars, but that experience makes it phenomenally seem to subjects that there are particulars. Consequently, standard versions of HO theory theorize that suitable HO states are themselves typically *not* conscious and become conscious only if targeted by yet HO suitable HO states, which is the standard HO account of introspection (e.g., Rosenthal 2005: 28ff).

HO perceptual relationalism thus exhibits no circularity: the view holds that it phenomenally seems to a subject S that there is a particular object O just in case S is *nonconsciously* aware of herself as being in a perceptual relation R to O via a suitable HO state H. While S has a perceptual experience just in case S is aware of herself as being in R via H, the perceptual experience is not the

[13] Some do theorize that states of awareness or appearance are invariably conscious, defined in terms of their phenomenal character (e.g., Tucker 2010). But such views are questionable and in tension with the motivations for HO theory (see, e.g., Berger 2017).

HO state, H, but rather the perceptual condition that the HO state makes one aware of oneself as being in—that is, R, the conscious perceptual relation, which is *the content of H*.

Still, it might seem that generalist HO perceptual relationalism fails because it inherits the same problems that face standard forms of generalist representationalism. After all, on the view, the perceived *relata* of R are described in general terms by the (contents of) the suitable HO state H. That is, it may still seem that the basic puzzle for generalist accounts remains: that we cannot get phenomenological particularity from existentially generalized content.

To see why this objection is misplaced, it will be helpful to appreciate why standard versions of HO theory are unable to explain phenomenological particularity. It is not because, as one might initially think, the contents of suitable HO states are themselves general, as I too propose. After all, HO theory in general distinguishes the perceptual experience in virtue of which it phenomenally seems to subjects that there are particulars from those objects of perceptual experience, or *what it phenomenally seems that there is*. Practically any theory draws a similar distinction. On standard versions of representationalism, we must plainly distinguish a (conscious) perceptual representation from its perceptual content; likewise, on standard versions of relationalism, we distinguish a (conscious) perceptual relation from its perceived *relatum*. HO theory similarly holds that, while one's conscious perceptual condition is a represented perceptual representation or relation, what one thereby consciously perceives there to be is not that represented representation or relation, but simply that perceived content or perceived *relatum*.

Standard forms of HO theory thereby cannot explain phenomenological particularity not because the relevant HO states have general contents, but because such general HO states represent one as being in perceptual representations that *themselves* have generalized contents. Consequently, what phenomenally appears to one on such views would not that perceptual representation—the content of the HO state, H—but rather whatever that perceptual representation represents—that is,

the content of the content of H. Suppose, for example, one were aware of oneself as being in a perceptual state with the general content <there is a red tomato>. What it phenomenally seems there to be, then, is that generalized content—that there is a red tomato, or some tomato or other. Standard versions of HO theory thus cannot explain the phenomenology of particularity because they are in effect a combination of HO theory and a generalist representationalism about the represented first-order states. Such a view thereby suffers the same limitations of standard versions of first-order generalist representationalism, whatever their theory of consciousness.

Whether or not the contents of suitable HO states are general, HO perceptual relationalism holds instead that the perceptual conditions that are described by suitable HO states are not themselves represented *as having contents*, but instead represented as having *relata*. By being in H, what there phenomenally seems to be is not the content of the content of H, as on this view that content of H, R, itself has no content. Rather, what it phenomenally seems there to be is what one perceives there to be via R—that is, *the object of the content of H*. And though one's HO state describes the first-order perceptual relation, and thus its *relata*, in general terms, the relation itself does not represent its *relata*, generally or otherwise. It is for this reason that there is and can be phenomenological particularity. On this view, it phenomenally appears there are particulars because, as some relationalists often put it, perceptual experience does not represent, but *presents* us with their *relata*, particulars (e.g., Martin 2004; French & Gomes 2019).[14] What phenomenally appears in perceptual

[14] This isn't to say that those *relata* are not represented at all; if that were the case, then perhaps we would experience something such as bare particulars, which is at least typically not the case. But one does not on this view perceptually experience particulars by (first-order) representing them; rather, one experiences them by (HO) seeming to be perceptually related to them.

experience is simply the (apparent) particular of the (apparent) perceptual relation—that very red tomato, say.

In that way, HO perceptual relationalism's explanation of the phenomenology of particularity is also similar to complex representationalist's account of such phenomenology in hallucination. Many would agree that it at least is possible to have hallucinatory experiences that exhibit phenomenological particularity. It would seem that, for example, whether one accurately visually experiences or hallucinates a red tomato, one would have in both cases an experience as of there being a particular red tomato. This follows if, as many assume, it is possible to have hallucinations that are phenomenologically indistinguishable from their counterpart veridical experiences.

Complex representationalists such as Schellenberg (2010; 2018) and Millar (2014) have thus aimed to explain the phenomenological particularity of hallucination in terms of the commonality of content-types across matching veridical and hallucinatory experiences one's conscious perceptual condition. After all, intentional states can represent what is not the case. And such representationalists propose that the fact that one suitably represents there to be a particular via the relevant particular-involving or demonstrative content-type, even if no particular is present, is sufficient to generate the phenomenological particularity that one would experience were that particular veridically perceived. On Schellenberg's view, for example, the content of a hallucination shares the same content-type with veridical experience, though it contains *gaps* that would be filled in veridical experience, contents are of the form: "(e_H)<MOP^1(___), MOP^2(___)>" (2010: 35). Such views thereby permit *merely apparent* particulars to explain phenomenological particularity.

HO perceptual relationalism similarly posits not first-order particular-involving content-types, but rather suitable HO representations of particulars. But this illustrates a major difference between HO perceptual relationalism and complex representationalism: the former explains such

phenomenology, even if veridical perception too does not constitutively involve particulars. Indeed, this account works, *whatever the nature of actual nature of first-order perception*.

At this point, however, one might remain unclear why and how such suitable HO states alone determine the phenomenology of perceptual experience. It is to that question that I now turn.

5.2. Perceptual appearance and perceptual reality

According to both the standard transitivity principle and the relational version, consciousness involves the suitably awareness of oneself as being in perceptual states or relations. But that shows that it is implicit in our ordinary conception of consciousness that HO theory seeks to capture that consciousness is a matter of what Rosenthal (e.g., 2011: 431) has called "mental appearance"—that is, how our mental lives appear to us subjectively or from the first-person perspective. On HO views, what it is to visually experience red is for one to be suitably aware of oneself as seeing red—that is, for it to suitably (and nonconsciously) *seem to one* that one sees red. A perceptual experience is thus not a first-order perceptual state modified by some FO-theoretic property, as first-order theories hold, but the suitable *appearance* of a first-order perceptual condition. So, one's perceptual experience is that *apparent* first-order condition, which is simply a function of one's suitable HO states, not one's *actual* first-order perceptual conditions.[15]

[15] Some HO theorists understand the theory to hold that a first-order mental state is conscious just in case there is an actual HO state that stands in an appropriate awareness relation to an actually existing first-order state (e.g., Gennaro 2012). These are what Brown (2015) calls *relational* versions of the view, on which HO states are necessary but not sufficient for consciousness. Relational

Moreover, as many HO theorists have urged (e.g., Rosenthal 2005; 2011; Weisberg 2011), since appearances in general can be inaccurate, one can visually experience red *whether or not one in fact is in a first-order visual perception as of red*. Rosenthal (e.g., 2011: 432) thus proposes that expressions such as 'conscious X' are nonextensional: being in a conscious perceptual relation to or conscious representation of red does not entail that one is in a (first-order) perceptual relation to or perceptual representation of red; one may simply be aware of oneself as perceiving red.

That consciousness is a matter of mental appearance does not entail that actual first-order perception never occurs. As appearances are often accurate, it may suitably seem to one that one sees red—that is, one may visually experience red so that it phenomenally seems that red is present—and one may also in fact see red. But, on HO theory, these two mental processes perform different explanatory functions (see, e.g., Rosenthal 2005: 217ff). The first-order seeing of red explains one's perceptual discriminatory behavior—how one tells the red things apart from their surroundings. The suitable HO appearance of seeing red explains, among other things, one's phenomenology and why one might verbally report that one sees red.

Many critics of HO theories, and HOT theory in particular, have maintained that the possibility of HO misrepresentation is incoherent or somehow undermines the theory (e.g., Block

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versions of HO theory depart from Rosenthal's standard version of the view, which Brown calls *nonrelational* versions of HO theory, on which consciousness only requires the suitable HO state, which is responsible for the relevant mental appearance. As many nonrelational-HO theorists have urged, such relational versions are in tension with the transitivity principle as motivation for HO views in general and face other problems (see, e.g., Berger & Brown 2021). So, despite the fact that HO perceptual relationalism posits that suitable HO states represent one as being in perceptual relations, it remains a nonrelational-HO theory in Brown's terminology.

2011). But as many proponents of HO views have argued, the ability for HO theory to accommodate HO misrepresentation is an advantage of the theory (e.g., Rosenthal 2011; Weisberg 2011). I likewise propose that it enable us to explain phenomenological particularity, whatever the underlying nature of perception.

According to generalist HO perceptual relationalism, for example, it may be that one's HO state represents one's first-order visual state as involving a relation to a red tomato, but that this first-order state is actually not a relation, but instead has a general content such as <there is a red tomato>. In such a case, one would experience phenomenological particularity, even though one is not actually perceptually related to a red tomato—or even if one really does not see a tomato at all. In other words, it is at least open that *all* mental content is general after all.

5.3. Advantages

There are many reasons to prefer this version of HO theory over other purported explanations of phenomenological particularity. The theory is plainly preferable to any first-order theory of perception on its own, such as standard versions of relationalism or representationalism. Without a theory of consciousness, an account of phenomenological particularity that holds only that perception has a certain (first-order) objects or contents will at best explain how *nonconscious* perception operates. And coupling such theories with first-order theories of consciousness such as global-workspace theory would offer no clear way to implement the transitivity principle.

The solution might seem instead to be to pair one of these theories with standard HO theory. But even here HO perceptual relationalism is to be preferred. We have already seen why this is the case for standard versions of generalist representationalism. But HO perceptual relationalism

is superior to versions of complex representationalism as well, even if matched with standard HO theory.

For one thing, it is not obvious that such alternatives are workable. I plainly cannot explore in detail all rival proposals and their issues, but, as an illustration, consider Millar's (2014) version of complex representationalism, the direct causal content view. Since Millar's view holds that complex first-order perceptual contents demonstratively represent objects as the causes of those experiences, and that such contents determine perceptual phenomenology, Millar must maintain that in perceptual experience we are phenomenally aware of our experiences. But, as he himself (2014: 650) acknowledges, many theorists would deny that. Rather, many would say that, in ordinary perceptual experience, it simply phenomenally seems that there are particular objects at certain locations.[16] Since debates about phenomenology are tricky, such an objection is far from decisive. But HO perceptual relationalism simply sidesteps the issue, avoiding complicating the phenomenology of perceptual experience.

HO perceptual relationalism also has advantages over standard varieties of relationalism. A well-known problem for such views is that, unlike varieties of representationalism, they offer no

[16] My point here is related to the so-called *transparency claim*—that we somehow "look through" our experiences to the objects and properties that we perceive there to be; that we are never thereby phenomenally presented with our experiences themselves (e.g., Harman 1990; Tye 2000). The transparency claim is controversial and I need not endorse it here (for discussion in the context of HO theory, see, e.g., Rosenthal 2005: 117ff). Perhaps, for example, we can be in introspection aware of our experiences as such. But it does seem plausible that in (non-introspective) perceptual experience it does not phenomenally seem that there are experiences or that objects are the causes of our experiences.

straightforward explanation of why pairs of accurate experiences and their hallucinatory counterparts are apparently phenomenologically indistinguishable. Because the experiences in such pairs involve distinct perceptual *relata*, standard forms of relationalism hold that such pairs of experiences must be phenomenally distinct—or even that hallucinatory experiences have no phenomenal character at all (see, e.g., Logue 2012)—though one cannot tell them apart introspectively. Many regard this upshot as unacceptable (e.g., Millar 2014; Schellenberg 2018: 18). But, again, HO perceptual relationalism offers a straightforward explanation of why veridical and hallucinatory perceptual experiences are introspectively *and* phenomenally indistinguishable: Sameness of HO content entails sameness of experience, whatever one may or may not be related to via first-order perception.

It's worth acknowledging that, in reply to the issue regarding the introspective indistinguishability of veridical and hallucinatory experience, some relationalists have proposed modified versions of the view. Building on Martin's (2002) account, for example, French and Gomes (2019) develop a version of relationalism which distinguishes an experience's phenomenal character from what they call its *phenomenal nature*, holding that phenomenology is multiply realizable by different phenomenal natures. They are thereby seemingly able to explain both particularity and how distinct perceptual relations may result in introspectively indistinguishable phenomenology.

But such a modified relationalism—and indeed varieties of complex representationalism that appeal to special particular-involving contents—face an even more basic downside: they posit additional, though arguably less well understood, types of relational modes or representational contents. Adding to our mental ontology without support *independent* of the particular problem at hand, however, runs the risk of being *ad hoc* or a mere relabeling of the problem, rather than a substantive solution. And such additions to our mental ontology are justified only on the condition that we cannot explain phenomenological particularity using the ordinary resources already present in our existing theorizing.

Perhaps the central advantage of the version of HO theory developed here is thus that it makes reference only to suitable HO states, which are arguably just ordinary thoughts, and their familiar (arguably existentially general) contents that any theory of the mind must acknowledge, whatever account of perception we adopt. Absent other considerations, then, this HO-theoretic account of phenomenological particularity is to be preferred over views that endorse relational particularity.[17]

5.4. Objections

This account may nonetheless seem to face several difficulties. Perhaps most pressingly, one might argue that, if our HO states represent us as being in relational perceptual states which are not in fact relational, then all our experiences would be in error—and that it is implausible that all our

[17] Of course, it may be that there are arguments for such views that depend on other kinds of phenomenological considerations or that do not depend on considerations of phenomenology at all. The putative *datum* of particularity, for example, might be described not as the phenomenological claim that, in experience, there appear to be particulars, but the metaphysical claim that, in experience, there are particulars that appear to us. This is in effect a motivation to explain not phenomenological, but relational particularity. But this way of describing the *datum* is perhaps question begging. Moreover, as phenomenological generalists have urged, that perception discriminates particulars could be explained by the fact that perceptual states are *causally* connected to particulars, though their contents are wholly general (e.g., Mehta & Ganson 2016: 3224). In any case, my point here is not to argue that relational particularity is unfounded, but that phenomenological considerations of particularity do not support it.

perceptual experiences would be hallucinatory or systematically in error in this way. Likewise, one might wonder *why* our ordinary concept of perception that figures in HO states is as of relational states, if perceptual states were not actually relational. After all, one might think that our concept of seeing would come to accurately reflect, or at least not take a stand, on perception's underlying nature. So, even if this version of HO theory could explain phenomenological particularity, one might one might wonder why we experience it in the first place.

There several things to note in reply. First, I am not arguing here that all mental content is general and that perception is therefore not relational. I am arguing that a relationally particular theory is not required to explain phenomenological particularity. But even if perceptual experience involves conscious perceptual relations, but there are no actual perceptual relations, it is wrong to claim that perceptual experience is therefore always hallucinatory. Rather, our experiences might generally be accurate, even if our HO appearances of them misrepresent them to some extent.

Because of its two-fold nature, HO theory recognizes two sorts of accuracy judgments about experience: what we might call 'FO accuracy', which assesses the extent to which one's first-order perceptual states accurately present features of the world and 'HO accuracy', or the extent to which one's HO states accurately present features of one's first-order states (see also, e.g., Berger 2020: 18). Perceptual experience need not be accurate in either of these ways to exhibit phenomenological particularity. But even if perceptual experiences are HO inaccurate insofar as one's HO states misrepresent one's first-order states as relational when they are not, such experiences may still be first-order accurate insofar as one perceives particulars in ways that are accurate.

Moreover, if HO theory of any type is correct, most or even perhaps all of our perceptual experiences involve some degree of HO inaccuracy anyway, though it would be wrong to say that they are always illusory. My argument throughout has in some ways echoed other HO theorists' efforts to explain how perception might appear otherwise in experience than it in fact is. Rosenthal

(2005: 173-174), for example, has urged that that our HO states often and perhaps always make it seems that our first-order perceptual states present seamless expanses of colors, when we have good theoretical reasons to think that perception actually represents colors in a kind of pointillist or particulate way. Whether or not Rosenthal is correct about the particulate nature of color perception, the fact that HO states could "smooth out" that perception in experience would not be a reason to doubt the theory, but rather a point in its explanatory favor.

As regards why our ordinary conception of perception represents perception as relational when it is arguably representational, this is too unsurprising. First, the notion of perception is a relation that puts us in contact with the world is arguably simpler than the idea that perception is somehow representational, so it might even be expected that our folk-psychological conception of perception holds that it is relational. But our commonsense ideas of things rarely capture, and often distort, their underlying natures. We ordinarily conceive of time as directional, but maybe it isn't. And, at least on HOT theory, HOTs are just ordinary thoughts, which happen to be our mental lives. Though they are about perception, and perhaps typically *caused* by those perceptual states, there is no reason to assume that the *representations* of perception that figure in HO states need wholly accurately reflect what they are about. Lastly, there are many explanations of how systematically misrepresentational concepts may arise that are wholly independent of theories of consciousness, to which our explanation might help itself (as an example, see, e.g., Queloz 2021). There is thus no serious reason to doubt that this HO-theoretic account of particularity is at least on the table.

6. Perception, consciousness, and the appearances of perceptual experience

I have argued that there is a way to unpack one our most promising theories of consciousness, a standard version of HO theory, that explains why perceptual experience often or even always seems

to be as of particulars, whatever the underlying nature of perception. An important consequence of HO perceptual relationalism is that the phenomenological appearance of particularity does not demand that perception constitutively involve particulars—and so, for example, a kind of generalist representationalism remains a possibility.

These investigations thus point to a broader moral about how debates in philosophy of perception may proceed. Debates about not only what the phenomenology of perceptual experience is, but also the implications of such phenomenology for theories of perception are significantly more complex when consciousness is explained via HO theory. Although many simply assume that views about the nature of perception might be partly or even wholly driven by phenomenological considerations, HO theory entails that perception need not exhibit whatever features it may seem to exhibit in experience. Rather, HO theory need only have the resources to explain how and why things phenomenologically seem the way they do. This is not to say that there should not be debates about what the structure of perception must be to accommodate certain facts about perception, but that appeals to phenomenology alone demand only explanations of those *appearances*—and that such appearances may be explained by reference to nature of HO states and not first-order perception itself.

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