

*Schellenberg's Capacitism**

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The Unity of Perception offers a grand synoptic vision of how perception, consciousness, and knowledge fit together. It is a remarkable achievement. A short comment can only address fragments of Schellenberg's picture; naturally I will look for weak spots.

The key idea of the book, Schellenberg explains, is that:

perception is constituted by employing perceptual capacities—for example the capacity to discriminate and single out instances of red from instances of blue. (2, underlining added)¹

I will start by discussing some issues raised by the underlined phrases, and then segue into an examination of the “Particularity Argument,” presented in the first chapter. Finally, I will raise a general worry about capacitism. There is an enormous amount of valuable material in *The Unity of Perception* that will go unmentioned.

But before all that, a brief note on Schellenberg's starting point. What are perceptual systems good for? Why do animals have them? A very appealing answer is that animals have them because perceptual systems supply useful information—more exactly, useful *knowledge*—about the (external and internal) environment. Even a philosopher who thinks that human perception is somehow fundamentally different from that of other animals can endorse a version of this point: after all, one of McDowell's books is *Perception as a Capacity for Knowledge*. No doubt the capacity to “single out and discriminate particulars” is important for *gaining* knowledge, but why put that capacity front and center, as opposed to the capacity to *know*?

1: Discrimination and singling out

This is how Schellenberg explains the pertinent notion of discrimination:

When we perceptually discriminate α from β we discriminate an actual, mind-independent particular α to which we are perceptually related from a distinct actual, mind-independent particular β to which we are similarly perceptually related...It is

* Many thanks to Susanna Schellenberg and E.J. Green.

¹ All references are to *The Unity of Perception* unless otherwise noted.

unclear how [someone] could be perceptually aware of, say, a leaf without registering how it differs in at least one respect from its surround. More generally, it is unclear how one could be perceptually aware of a particular without registering how it differs in at least one respect from its surround. The basic level of employing perceptual capacities is to discriminate one particular from another, where this discrimination is understood as registering their differences. (37)²

And here is her account of “singling out”:

Singling out a particular can be understood as a proto-conceptual analogue of referring to a particular. Non-rational animals and infants as young as four months old can perceptually single out particulars in their environment, yet on at least some notions of “reference” they do not have the capacity to refer. (34)

How are discrimination and singling out related? It is clear that Schellenberg thinks that (perceptually) singling out α requires discriminating α from some other particular β . But discriminating α from β does not seem to require singling out α :

...perceiving an instance of red is distinct from perceiving an instance of blue. Both cases may involve discriminating red from blue, but in the former case an instance of red is singled out, while in the latter case an instance of blue is singled out. (36)

Suppose one discriminates an instance of red from an instance of blue and singles out the instance of blue but not the instance of red. Then one is “perceptually related” to both instances (see p. 32 for an explanation of this terminology). Does one also *perceive* both instances? No, because perceiving α requires discriminating *and* singling out α . The explanation of “singling out α ” suggests that it amounts to *attending* to α , but then Schellenberg should not have said that perceiving α requires singling it out, since one can perceive something without attending to it. Either singling out adds something to discrimination, in which case it is doubtfully a constitutive component of perception, or else it adds nothing, in which case it can be deleted.

² This passage suggests that if one looks at a leaf perfectly camouflaged against its surround, one is not “perceptually aware” of the leaf. But when Schellenberg discusses the perception of a uniformly colored wall she says that the perceiver “is discriminating the part of the uniformly colored wall to her right from the part of the wall to her left” (27).

2: Property-instances

We perceive objects like pigs and lemons, and events like a pig's grunt or a lemon's crushing. Schellenberg thinks that we also perceive other sorts of particulars, "property-instances":

The relevant particulars perceived can be objects, events, or property-instances in our environment...I will assume an Aristotelian view on which properties are understood in terms of their instances. Hence, I will assume that we perceive property-instances. These property-instances could be, but need not be, understood as tropes. Regardless of whether or not property-instances are understood to be tropes, they are particulars and not universals. (15)

As Schellenberg of course recognizes, it is controversial whether there are any property-instances (or tropes, if these are different). A red tomato falls from the table and messily explodes on the floor. There is an object—the tomato—and some events—the tomato's fall, the tomato-explosion. There are some properties or universals—redness, falling, making a splat!-sound and so on. And there are some facts involving these previous items—the fact that the tomato is red, for instance. Schellenberg has no issue with any of these. But, she thinks, there are some *other* items, like the "particular instance of redness" qualifying the tomato. That might seem like overkill—what do property-instances do that objects, events, properties and facts don't?

One thing they do, Schellenberg argues, is *causally affect* us:

So when we perceive, say, the shape of the cup in front of us, that shape must be causally efficacious—otherwise we could not perceive it. Thus, given plausible assumptions about causation, the shape of the cup must be a concrete spatio-temporal particular rather than a universal. After all, universals are neither spatio-temporally located nor causally efficacious. (15)

Grant, for the sake of the argument, that universals are not causally efficacious, and that particular property-instances are. Here is an option that Schellenberg needs to rule out for her argument to work. We perceive the cup's shape (understood as a universal, something shared with other similar cups) because we are causally affected by a particular instance of that shape, the one qualifying the cup in front of us. But we do not *perceive* this particular property-instance: the only particular we perceive is the cup.

And that option is hardly unattractive, because it is far from clear that we do perceive property-instances. Here are some things (particulars): \blacktriangle \square \triangle . How many are there? The answer your visual system apparently gives is ‘three’, at least in the sense that one can immediately tell by looking that there are three particulars: a black triangle, a white square, and a white triangle.³ But on the property-instance ontology there are many more particulars than that. There is the instance of triangularity on the left, and another instance of triangularity on the right; there is an instance of whiteness on the right, and another instance of whiteness in the middle. And so on. On Schellenberg’s view you see, and so discriminate and single out, all these instances.

If property instances are so important to perception, one might expect perceptual science to make use of them, but it doesn’t. There is plenty of talk about objects and their perceptible “features,” but none at all about property-instances. And even if we do perceive property-instances, perceptual systems treat them very differently from particular objects and events. There is no evident motivation for lumping all these together.

3: Constitution and the Particularity Argument

Schellenberg gives this explanation of “constitution”:

A is constituted by *B*, if and only if *A* is grounded in *B*, where grounding is understood as a relation that can hold between entities such as mental states and material, mind-independent particulars (and not just between propositions). So when I say that *A* is constituted by *B*, I mean that *A* is at least partially grounded in *B* without *B* necessarily being a material component of *A*. (16, footnotes omitted)

With the account of constitution in hand, let us now turn to Schellenberg’s argument that for the “Particularity Thesis,” “that a subject’s perceptual state is constituted by the particulars perceived” (5). Suppose Kim sees cup_1 , and that her perceptual state M_K is constituted by cup_1 . Does the existence of M_K entail the existence of cup_1 ? As philosophers of perception would typically understand this question, the answer is ‘yes’, and I think that is Schellenberg’s answer as well (see fn. 1, pp. 13-4). Moreover, the issue of entailment is really what divides the

³ On the perception of number, see e.g. Cicchini et al. 2016.

“particularist” from the “generalist” (17). Bearing that in mind, here is the Particularity Argument:

- I. If a subject S perceives particular α , then S discriminates and singles out α (as a consequence of being perceptually related to α).
 - II. If S discriminates and singles out α (as a consequence of being perceptually related to α), then S 's perceptual state M brought about by being perceptually related to α is constituted by discriminating and singling out α .
 - III. If S 's perceptual state M brought about by being perceptually related to α is constituted by discriminating and singling out α , then S 's perceptual state M brought about by being perceptually related to α is constituted by α .
- C: If S perceives α , then S 's perceptual state M brought about by being perceptually related to α is constituted by α . (24-5; conclusion relettered)

The second premise of the Particularity Argument, Schellenberg says,

...is supported by the following general principle [GP]: if a subject is in a mental state in virtue of engaging in a mental activity, then that mental state is constituted at least in part by that mental activity. (25)

We can make the connection between GP and Premise II even clearer by slightly reformulating the latter:

II*. If S discriminates and singles out α , and she is in perceptual (mental) state M in virtue of this mental activity, then M is constituted by discriminating and singling out α .

And II* plainly follows from GP (also slightly reformulated):

GP. If S is in a mental state in virtue of engaging in a mental activity, then that mental state is constituted by that mental activity.

Now recall Schellenberg's account of constitution: A is constituted by B if and only if A is grounded in B . We can then rewrite GP as follows:

GP*. If S is in a mental state in virtue of engaging in a mental activity, then that mental state is *grounded in* that mental activity.

‘Grounded in’ is terminology from high-church metaphysics. What does it mean? It is usually taken to have an equivalent formulation in terms of the more ordinary-sounding ‘in virtue of’⁴:

X is grounded in Y iff X (obtains, exists,...) in virtue of Y (obtaining, existing,...).

The problem is not that GP is false. Quite the contrary: it is now looking like a tautology, as is Premise II*:

II* If S discriminates and singles out α , and in virtue of this mental activity she is in perceptual state M , then M is constituted by discriminating and singling out α ; [i.e. *she is in M in virtue of discriminating and singling out α*].

This is not (yet) to give an *objection* to the Particularity Argument. But it does allow some simplification. A shorter version of the argument can (I suggest) be put as follows:

I*. If S perceives α , then S discriminates and singles out α , and she is in perceptual state M in virtue of discriminating and singling out α .

III*. If S is in perceptual state M in virtue of discriminating and singling out α , then S 's perceptual state M is constituted by α .

C: If S perceives α , then S 's perceptual state M is constituted by α .

The generalist, Schellenberg's opponent, denies C. He thinks that someone could be in perceptual state M by perceiving β , a particular qualitatively identical to α (even in a counterfactual scenario in which α does not exist). He may say, for instance, that all that is required to be in M is for one's brain to be in intrinsic state B . The opponent thus denies that *seeing α* is a “perceptual state,” strictly speaking.

Should the generalist be worried by the Particularity Argument? Despite siding with Schellenberg's particularism, I do not think so. The generalist can agree with Schellenberg that perceiving α requires discriminating and singling it out. But he can (for all Schellenberg has said) fairly deny that S is in perceptual state M *in virtue of* discriminating and singling out α . On his view, S is in M in virtue of having a brain in intrinsic state B .

⁴ See, e.g., Audi 2012.

4: A general worry about capacitism

The basic capacitist idea is that perception is constituted by employing perceptual capacities to discriminate and single out objects (more generally, particulars). In the specific case of vision, seeing an object is constituted by (successfully) employing the visual capacity to discriminate and single out objects. Now, arguably, visually discriminating and singling out x amounts to *seeing* x . As Dretske put it:

S sees_n $D = D$ is visually differentiated from its immediate environment by S . (1969: 20)⁵

If this is right, the basic idea can be put more simply: seeing an object is constituted by (successfully) employing the visual capacity to see objects. This is not at all trivial. In fact, the general equation of F ing with (successfully) employing the capacity to F is incorrect. I have no *capacity* to hit the bullseye, but I might hit it by a fluke. Can we do the same for seeing an object?

Here is an example from Lewis:

The Loose Wire. A prosthetic eye has a loose wire. Mostly it flops around; and when it does the eye malfunctions and the subject's visual experience consists of splotches unrelated to the scene before the eyes. But sometimes it touches the contact it ought to be bonded to; and as long as it does, the eye functions perfectly and the subject sees. Whether he sees has nothing to do with whether the wire touches the contact often, or seldom, or only this once. (1980: 244)

Lewis is actually concerned with "seeing in the intransitive sense, not seeing such-and-such particular thing" (241), but the example works just as well for both. We can add more loose wires to make it even clearer that the subject with a (in practice non-functional) prosthetic eye lacks the capacity to see objects, in any useful sense of 'capacity.' Yet an improbable coincidental joining of many loose wires results in the subject fleetingly seeing a tomato.

This is one reason to be skeptical of capacitism. But there is every reason for philosophers with an interest in mind or epistemology to read *The Unity of Perception*.

⁵ 'Sees_n' is Dretske's way of marking "non-epistemic" seeing (1969: 20).

References

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