

# WHEN NOTHING LOOKS BLUE

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## Abstract

David Pitt (2017) has argued that reductive representationalism entails an absurdity akin to the ‘paramechanical hypothesis’ Gilbert Ryle (1949) attributed to Descartes. This paper focuses on one version of reductive representationalism: the property-complex theory. We contend that at least insofar as the property-complex theory goes, Pitt is wrong. The result is not just a response to Pitt, but also a clarification of the aims and structure of the property-complex theory.

David Pitt (2017) has recently argued that reductive representationalism (‘RR’) is committed to an absurd thesis about the nature of hallucination. The absurdity is akin to the ‘paramechanical hypothesis’ Gilbert Ryle (1949) attributed to Descartes, according to which mental processes are just like physical processes, absent the matter.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Pitt sees the RR’ist as being committed to a *paraphenomenal hypothesis* (‘PH’), on which hallucinatory experiences are just like veridical experiences, except that, in a hallucinatory experience, there is nothing

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<sup>1</sup>As Pitt notes, whether Descartes actually held this view is irrelevant. We take no stance on the historical question here.

that (phenomenally) appears, or seems, any way to us. Hallucinating green grass is the same thing as seeing green grass—just without the grass.

We have twin aims, one smaller and one larger. Our smaller aim is polemical: we will contend that Pitt is mistaken. One of the more well-known forms of RR—the *property-complex theory* (Dretske 1995; Bengson, Grube & Korman 2011; Tye 2014ab, 2015)—is *not* committed to the PH. Our larger aim is clarificatory. Pitt’s argument, though flawed, is symptomatic of fairly common misconceptions of the aims and structure of the property-complex theory. A remedy is thus overdue. We begin with a brief description of RR and the property-complex theory, before turning to Pitt’s argument.

## 1 The Property-Complex Theory

Pitt describes RR as follows:

These theorists hold that the phenomenology of perception. . . can be reduced to a kind of non-phenomenal intentionality, which in turn can be explained in naturalistic causal–informational–teleological terms. The qualitative features associated with an experience are properties, not of the experience, but of the worldly (or bodily) things it represents. The blue that characterizes what it’s like to see a clear sky at noon, for example, is a property, not of one’s experience of the sky, but of *the sky*. Its relevance to the characterization of the *experience* of a clear sky at noon is due to the fact that one’s experience *represents*

it, not that one's experience *instantiates* it. These views are *externalist* about qualia. (2017: 735-36)

RR comes in many forms, but as an illustrative case we will focus on the *property-complex theory*, or 'PC theory' for short. This view consists of two core claims. First: phenomenal character is *identical* to a property-complex, which may or may not be instantiated in the subject's environment (e.g. Dretske 1995: 73; Tye 2014a: 54, fn. 13; 56). Second: to have an experience—whether veridical (henceforth, VE) or hallucinatory (henceforth, HE)—with a property-complex as its phenomenal character, the subject must have a mental state of the right sort that *represents* this property-complex, which thereby makes the subject *aware* of the property-complex.<sup>2</sup> So experiences 'have' phenomenal characters in the same way a predicate has a semantic value (e.g. a property); not by instantiating it, but by representing it (Tye 2014b: 85).<sup>3,4</sup>

Suppose a subject S has a HE as of a blue ball, and later a VE as of a blue ball.<sup>5</sup> HE and VE, we'll assume, are phenomenally identical. The PC theory says

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<sup>2</sup>Property-complexes, being constituted by ordinary physical properties, can be represented unconsciously. Hence why there is a need for a 'right sort' clause: only perceptual representations of the right sort constitute conscious experiences. While this is not essential to the PC theory itself, at least in Tye's case, the relevant condition is that of the representation's playing the right functional role (Tye 2014b: 86; cf. Tye 2000: 62-63).

<sup>3</sup>Mark Johnston (2004) qualifies as a property-complex theorist absent this second condition, since he denies that experiences represent.

<sup>4</sup>Pitt (2017: 738) contends that non-reductive representationalism does not face the challenges of RR, since on that view, when S has a HE as of a blue ball, the phenomenal properties that characterize S's experience are instantiated by the experience itself. Developing non-reductive representationalism as a positive proposal is neither Pitt's focus, nor is engaging with it in any meaningful way our focus here. However, if non-reductive representationalism is motivated by the purported failure of RR to adequately address hallucination, then we suggest that this motivation is merely apparent.

<sup>5</sup>Here we are focused on *total* hallucinations.

that HE and VE will represent the same property-complex, e.g.:

$$B: \lambda x(x \text{ is blue} \wedge x \text{ is round})$$

The represented property-complexes are structured out of simpler properties (Tye 2014c: 306). In the present case,  $B$ —the property of being an  $x$  such that  $x$  is blue and  $x$  is round—has *being blue* and *being round* as parts. All that distinguishes  $S$ 's VE and HE is whether the property-complex is instantiated. In the HE, the property-complex is wholly uninstantiated.

## 2 Where to put the property?

The route from the PC theory to the PH is predicated on three background theses. The first two are general, applying to all experiences on the PC theory. The third point concerns hallucination.

First, EXTERNALISM: the PC theory is an *externalist* variant of representationalism. The PC theorist drives phenomenal character—what your experience is like—out into the world (Tye 2015). You can become aware *that* you are having an experience as of a blue ball, but you are not aware *of* your experience. You are aware of  $B$ , and if the experience is veridical, the ball. Nothing else. The qualitative features associated with your experience, then, are properties of (if anything) the worldly (or bodily) things it represents, not of the experience itself. To take a different example, the greenness that characterizes what it's like to look at healthy grass is a property, not of the experience of the grass, but of the grass itself.

Second, COMMON KIND: HE's and VE's are fundamentally the same kind of mental event. Compare the disjunctivist: VE's are fundamentally relations of acquaintance with mind-independent objects and properties, while HE's are something else altogether (Martin 2004).<sup>6</sup> The PC theory is, at least by design, resolutely anti-disjunctivist.

Third, NO INSTANTIATION: when S has a HE as of a blue ball, the *only* thing the PC theorist has at her disposal to explain the phenomenal facts—e.g. the fact that it (phenomenally) seems to S as if there is something that is  $\varphi$ —is that S is harboring a perceptual representation of the right sort that represents  $B$ , where  $B$  is an uninstantiated property-complex. What makes S's HE phenomenally indistinguishable from her VE of a blue ball is that they both represent the very same property-complex  $B$ . Indeed, they are indistinguishable precisely because they are phenomenally identical.

With these points in place, we can reconstruct the problem as follows. Let's start with two relatively innocuous claims:

P1 In a HE, it (phenomenally) seems to S as if there is something that is  $\varphi$ .<sup>7</sup>

P2 In a HE, there is no  $x$  that seems  $\varphi$  to S.<sup>8</sup>

On P1: when S has an HE as of a blue ball, it seems to S as if there is something

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<sup>6</sup>Disjunctivism is a big tent. Some forms of disjunctivism classify illusions with VE's, and some classify illusions with HE's. Some give wholly negative treatments of HE (Martin 2006), while some give more substantive, positive account of hallucination (Logue 2013). These distinctions are irrelevant for present purposes.

<sup>7</sup>On the PC theory, the fact that things seem  $\varphi$  to S is just a matter of S being in a state that represents (e.g.)  $B$ . Yet  $\varphi$ , i.e. how things seem to S—the phenomenal character of S's experience—is just  $B$  itself.

<sup>8</sup>We are bracketing so-called veridical hallucinations.

before her that is blue and round. On P2: when S hallucinates, S is aware of *B*. But as Pitt (Ibid: 737) notes, being uninstantiated, *B* doesn't itself *look* or *seem* or *appear* any way to S.<sup>9</sup> And S's hallucinatory experience doesn't itself seem  $\varphi$  either, since S isn't aware of her experience. She isn't aware of anything but *B*. This is what NO INSTANTIATION comes to.

So putting P1 and P2 together, what we know is that, *at least in a hallucination*, it seeming to S as if there is something that is  $\varphi$  *won't* hold in virtue of there being an *x* that seems  $\varphi$  to S. As Pitt points out, in an HE on the PC theory, "there isn't anything out there that is the bearer of the properties we're aware of in experience" (2017: 736). Yet according to Pitt, this actually unearths a deep worry in light of the PC theorist's commitment to EXTERNALISM and COMMON KIND. Consider the veridical counterpart to P1:

P1\* In a VE, it (phenomenally) seems to S as if there is something that is  $\varphi$ .

What seems blue and round to S when she has her VE is the ball, and by EXTERNALISM the phenomenal character of S's VE *just is* a feature of the ball. It's tempting then to think that in P1\*, it seeming to S as if there is something that is  $\varphi$  *will* hold in virtue of there being an *x* that seems  $\varphi$  to S. And given COMMON KIND, we should say the same thing about HE's. Generalizing, we thus get:

P3 If the PC theory is true, then in any experience E—including hallucinations—it (phenomenally) seems to S as if there is something that is  $\varphi$  in virtue of there being an *x* such that *x* seems  $\varphi$  to S (where *x* is not E).

And then if you conjoin P3 with P1, it follows that:

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<sup>9</sup>Although see fn. 12.

∴ If the PC theory is true, then in a HE, there is an x such that x (phenomenally) seems  $\varphi$  to S.

Of course, we can now see where this is heading. For when coupled with P2, it also follows that:

∴ PC theory is false.

Pitt does not frame his discussion in precisely these terms. Nonetheless, the argument bears on the point at hand insofar as it makes clear why Pitt thinks the PC theorist is committed to the PH.

To see why, consider P3. This premise should strike the reader as being somewhat curious, reminiscent as it is of Robinson's (1994: 32) *phenomenal principle*, often itself understood as anathema to representationalism given its association with sense-datum theories (e.g. Fish 2010: 79). So there is no doubt that the PC theorist will want to reject P3. However, we take it that Pitt's point is that without P3, the PH follows:

...[In HE's] there's no place to put the property you'd mention in describing what your experience [e.g. of a blue sky] is like. It *can't* be the same thing, only without the sky, since the sky was where the qualitative feature you experienced was supposed to be located.  
(2017: 737)

As emphasized, the PC theory seeks to respect COMMON KIND. Yet if Pitt is right, then *without* P3, in HE's there is now nothing external that instantiates the

property-complex  $B$ , and so nothing that seems or looks some way to  $S$ .<sup>10</sup> As a result, HE's are about as much like VE's as non-material mental processes are like physical processes on the paramechanical hypothesis. In other words, they are not alike at all.

And the PH isn't a problem merely because of COMMON KIND. Suppose the PC theorist said that the property-complexes were instantiated by the experiences themselves—experiences which, naturally enough, would be present in both HE's and VE's. COMMON KIND would be upheld, but at the expense of EXTERNALISM. Thus, the PH seems to cut to the dual ambitions that motivate the PC theory, i.e. reducing phenomenal properties to the properties of external objects *while also* acknowledging that VE's and HE's are fundamentally the same kind of mental event. As Pitt puts it, “if the things that have the properties that appear to us are removed”—as is the case in a HE—“then the basis for a reductive account of the phenomenality of experience goes with them” (2017: 737-38).

### 3 Non-referential Looks

Whether or not the PH is itself absurd, we submit that it is not absurd to think that the PC theorist might be committed to the PH. After all, if the aim of the PC theory is to drive phenomenal character out of the head and into the world, it's not clear how this could apply in hallucinatory cases. When we hallucinate, there is

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<sup>10</sup>Pitt says that “[In HE's] there's *no place* to put the property” (2017: 737, our emphasis). We assume what he means is that the property is not *locally instantiated*. After all, in the case of any of the properties that in principle can be experienced, their instantiation is coextensive with them being spatiotemporally located.



a head (or just a brain), but no world—at least not in the sense that there is some object outside us that appears to us some way. Thus it is no surprise that Pitt’s worry has some precedent (Thompson 2008), with some going so far as to argue that what PH reveals is that, COMMON KIND notwithstanding, PC theory is really just a form of disjunctivism (Gow 2018).<sup>11</sup> Of course, disjunctivism is not without its own problems, but it is certainly not absurd.

A move towards disjunctivism, however, is premature. The PC theorist can reject P3 without committing to PH.<sup>12</sup> Articulating exactly how is critical to dispelling misunderstandings of the PC theory.

It will help to separate the consequent of P3 into two claims. Recall, P3 said this: if the PC theory is true, then in any experience E, it (phenomenally) seems to S as if there is something that is  $\varphi$  in virtue of there being an x such that x seems  $\varphi$  to S (where x is not E). So, focusing on the consequent, we first have:

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<sup>11</sup>Pitt (2017: 739) floats the idea that PC theory might just collapse into a form of disjunctivism, but he thinks disjunctivism is itself untenable.

<sup>12</sup>What about P2? As it happens, Tye grants it:

[I]t is a mistake to model our awareness of qualities on our awareness of particulars. When we see particulars they look various qualities but the qualities themselves do not look any way (2006, note 20).

But it is not clear that the PC theorist *must* grant P2. We have been supposing that properties are universals. It is standardly assumed that properties so construed do not instantiate themselves. However, on some trope-theoretic approaches to properties (e.g., Garcia 2015), properties *can* instantiate themselves. Sethi (2020) argues that this metaphysical picture allows us to make sense of the idea that in hallucination there is some x that seems some way to S—a trope. So if we marry a RR approach to perceptual experience with a trope-theoretic account of properties (e.g. Nanay 2012), we then can evade Pitt’s argument by rejecting P2. This is why we described P2 as “relatively innocuous” as opposed to simply innocuous: it is potentially tenable, but it relies on a controversial view of properties. Of course, every theory of perceptual experience inevitably embraces something controversial, but since we don’t see rejecting P2 as the PC theorist’s *considered* move, we set it aside here.

(P3a) It (phenomenally) seems to S as if there is something that is  $\varphi$ .

And then:

(P3b) There is some  $x$  such that  $x$  (phenomenally) seems  $\varphi$  to S.

The consequent of P3 holds that P3a is grounded in P3b. From this it follows that P3a cannot obtain absent P3b's obtaining. But, according to the PC theory, this is false. Suppose S has two phenomenally matching experiences as of a blue ball, one of which is a VE while the other is a HE. In both cases, P3a will hold. In S's VE both P3a and P3b will hold. Yet although it is true that P3a obtains in the case of VE, it will hold not because P3b holds, but simply because S is aware of the properties of the blue ball, i.e.  $B$ . Here  $B$  is instantiated, but *its being instantiated* is irrelevant to P3a obtaining, or to how things seem to S more generally.

Similarly, in a matching HE, it seems to S as if there is a blue ball because S is aware of the properties (i.e.  $B$ ) a blue ball *would* instantiate, not because there exists something that seems blue. The fact that no particular instantiates  $B$ , and the fact that P3b does not hold, does not undermine P3a. So, Pitt's point that "the basis for a reductive account of the phenomenality of experience" (2017: 737-38) is eliminated whenever we eliminate the object (as in a HE), betrays a misunderstanding. For on the PC theory, objects never mattered to the phenomenal character of experience to begin with, irrespective of whether the experience is veridical or hallucinatory.

Put another way, the PC theorist would reject the PH because the *veridicality* of a VE—and thus that (e.g.)  $B$  is instantiated and that there is something that

looks blue and round—is irrelevant to the VE’s phenomenal character. And that holds quite generally; phenomenal characters *just are* property-complexes. Note that while this implies that external *objects* are otiose insofar as phenomenology goes, it does not imply that the PC theorist has abandoned EXTERNALISM. For all we have said here, all of the represented property-complexes can be mind-independent. And that is good enough for EXTERNALISM. When it is said that phenomenal character is driven out into the world, what is meant is that (e.g.) greenness—the property that characterizes what it is like to have (e.g.) experiences of healthy grass—if instantiated at all, it is instantiated by the grass.

So the way to understand COMMON KIND on the PC theory is like this: the experience involved in veridical perception and hallucination are both fundamentally representations of property-complexes. The fundamental kind of mental event that occurs when S sees a blue, round ball as blue and round—subjectively characterized by it seeming to S as if there is something that is  $\varphi$ —is precisely what is present when S has a phenomenally identical hallucination as of a blue, round ball: a perceptual representation of *B*.

Thus, *pace* the PH, HE’s are not *just like* VE’s absent there being something that (phenomenally) appears, or seems, any way to us. No: what’s true is that HE’s *are* just like VE’s because both cases are fundamentally a matter of it seeming to S *as if* there is something that is  $\varphi$ . In this way, P3a is analogous to:

(P3a’) It’s raining.

In P3a’, ‘it’ is non-referential. It does not refer to some *x* such that *x* is raining—it

does not commit us to saying that  $\exists x(Rx)$ . Thus P3a is not like:

(P3b') It's blue.

In P3b', there is some  $x$  such that  $x$  is blue. In this way, P3b' tracks P3b. But, again, P3b doesn't pick out anything *fundamental* about having a visual experience as of a blue ball; perceptual experiences, irrespective of their accuracy, are not fundamentally cases of awareness external material objects, or fundamentally a matter of objects themselves seeming some way. When nothing looks blue, we still have experiences as of something blue. And when something does look blue, the thing itself is irrelevant to the phenomenology of your experience as of something blue.

A final point. A corollary of COMMON KIND is that, for any VE, there is a subjectively indistinguishable HE. Pitt protests that the PC theorists' commitment to NO INSTANTIATION violates this corollary, remarking that "instantiated pink and uninstantiated pink are experientially distinguishable" (2017: 738). Now Pitt does not tell us why this is so, but perhaps the idea is something like this. In undergoing most if not all experiences—whether veridical or not—it will seem, phenomenologically speaking, as if we are aware of particulars, including both objects and property-instances. Following Susanna Schellenberg (2010: 23), call this *phenomenal particularity*. This strikes us as a datum.

Suppose then that  $S$  undergoes a VE with phenomenal particularity; it is part of the phenomenal character of this VE that, when  $S$  undergoes it, it will seem to  $S$  as if she is aware of a particular. Given the aforementioned corollary of COMMON KIND, it follows that there is an HE with phenomenal particularity. But now we

have a potential source of Pitt’s worry; for how could a HE have phenomenal particularity when (by NO INSTANTIATION) it does not represent a particular *at all*? The PC theorist, recall, explains the possibility of subjectively indistinguishable HE’s and VE’s by their representing *one and the very same property-complex*; identity of represented property-complex entails identity of phenomenal character (property-complexes *just are* phenomenal characters), and sameness of phenomenal character entails subjective indistinguishability. But again, this also means that instantiation has no phenomenal import. The objection from phenomenal particularity can be seen as casting doubt on this claim.<sup>13</sup>

This is a complicated matter, but the PC theorist can supply an answer by appealing to Johnston’s (2004) *mimicry strategy*. The idea here is to posit that all represented property-complexes include *spatiotemporal* universals. So now, instead of *B*, S’s experience represents:

$$B^*: \lambda x(x \text{ is blue} \wedge x \text{ is round} \wedge x \text{ is at location } L \wedge x \text{ is at time } t)$$

According to Johnston, the spatiotemporal relational element within the represented property-complex “mimics spatial and temporal extent and thereby mimics particularity” (Ibid: 142). So even though the property-complex represented by S’s HE (i.e. *B\**) is constituted of locally uninstantiated universals, when S undergoes this HE, in virtue of *B\** having detailed spatiotemporal properties as its constituents, it will still *seem* to S as if she is aware of a particular. If that’s right, then phenomenal particularity itself would give us no reason to think instantiation

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<sup>13</sup>Many thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing something very much like this worry.

has phenomenal import.<sup>14</sup>

## 4 Conclusion

In sum, we conclude that Pitt’s argument, as attractive as it may initially seem, betrays a misconception of the PC theory, and also the resources available to the theory. Consequently, the argument fails. Externalist RR—at least the variant under discussion here—if absurd, is not absurd on account of the PH. Of course, there remains the question of whether the PC theory can really account for the phenomenal facts by appealing to property-complexes alone, and whether we really can be aware of uninstantiated property-complexes (cf. Pautz 2007). Yet these questions are *further* questions, orthogonal to the present question of what the PC theory actually says, and whether what it says entails the PH, or must collapse into a form of disjunctivism. On these matter at least, Pitt—and others—are wrong.

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<sup>14</sup>Again, nothing here provides *independent* reasons—i.e. reasons independent of the PC theory—for thinking that instantiation has no phenomenal import. But once more, Pitt does not provide reasons for the contrary position either. So our point simply pertains to how phenomenal particularity might bear on these matters. That said, we think Johnston’s mimicry strategy is better than other moves on the market. For instance, Christopher Hill (2019) endorses *existentialism* (alternatively, ‘generalism’), where experiences have descriptive propositions as their content. On Hill’s variant, these descriptions are very fine-grained and highly determinate, which is what explains phenomenal particularity (Ibid: 14). It would be unwise, though, for the PC theorist to co-opt this move. Take peripheral and blurry vision. In the former, we represent coarse-grained properties (e.g. blue, not blue<sub>63</sub>); in the latter, we represent highly indeterminate boundaries. Yet in both cases our experiences have phenomenal particularity. What’s diminished is their ‘vividness’ (Bourget 2017) or *presentational character* (Gottlieb 2018). This is the obvious but hard to articulate sense in which, unlike pure thought, perceptual experiences seem to make their objects *directly there*. So Hill’s proposal fails as it confuses phenomenal particularity with presentational character. The latter is gradable—experiences in peripheral vision present their objects less vividly than those in foveal vision—but the former is not.

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