

Naïve Realism and the Relationality of Phenomenal Character

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Abstract

Naïve realism (also called ‘relationalism’ or ‘object view’) is becoming increasingly popular, but the specific outline of its commitments remains often underspecified by proponents and misunderstood by critics. Naïve realism is associated with two claims, both concerning genuine, veridical perceptual experience (where this excludes hallucinations). Constitutive Claim (CC): The phenomenal character of perception is (partly) constituted by the mind-independent objects in one’s surrounding and their properties. Relational Claim (RC): Perception is a relation to mind-independent objects in the environment and their properties. Some philosophers use the two claims interchangeably while talking about naïve realism, while others use only one or the other, although they do not explicitly discuss if the other claim is also a core commitment of naïve realism, or if naïve realism can be held without the other claim. This raises the question of how RC and CC relate to one another, together with the most pressing question of what each claim ultimately commits one to. After discussing the shortcomings of alternative interpretations, I argue that naïve realism should be understood as committed to, first and foremost, RC. This should be understood as a claim about the phenomenal character of perception, rather than about its nature, structure or essence (whatever that means). CC, on the other hand, should be understood as a corollary of RC. This doesn’t only offer a better characterisation of how naïve realists understand phenomenal character: it also helps us understand how we can simultaneously claim that the object of perception is a constitutive element of perception, while also allowing for it to play a causal role in determining perception.

Naïve realism (also called ‘relationalism’ or ‘object view’) is becoming increasingly popular, but the specific outline of its commitments remains often underspecified by proponents and misunderstood by critics. It is associated with two claims, both concerning genuine, veridical perceptual experience (where this excludes hallucinations):

“Constitutive Claim (CC): The phenomenal character of perception is (partly) constituted by the mind independent objects in one’s surrounding and their properties.”

“Relational Claim (RC): Perception is a relation to mind-independent objects in the environment and their properties.”

Some philosophers use the two claims interchangeably while talking about naïve realism, while others use only one or the other, although they do not explicitly discuss if the other claim is also a core commitment of naïve realism, or if naïve realism can be held without the other claim. To my knowledge, only two philosophers have discussed this explicitly, and their conclusions

diverge. For Beck (2017) the core claim of naïve realism is RC, while Steenhagen (2019) claims that “naïve realism about perception can be upheld without a commitment to relationalism [RC].” This raises a series of questions. What is the relation between these claims? Does a naïve realist need to commit to both, or can one forsake one of them, while preserving naïve realism? Is one claim the corollary of the other? Does one entail the other (given some reasonable assumption)?

Of course, in order to being able to answer these questions concerning the relation between the two claims, we should know what these claims commit to exactly. Unfortunately, as I will argue, this is far from clear. In particular, CC seems implausible, while RC seems just too weak, unable on its own to distinguish naïve realism from many alternative views of perception.

In §1, I will go through different possible readings of CC and I will argue in favour of ontological dependence reading of it, while arguing that this offers only a partial characterization of the phenomenal character. In §2 I will argue that RC offers an inadequate characterization of naïve realism, if we interpret it, as it’s often the case, as a claim about the nature or structure of perception. Instead, I will argue in §3, we need to understand it as a claim about the phenomenal character and that CC follows from this reading of RC. In §4 I present an argument against CC, which threatens to either prove naïve realism wrong, or force us to reject, contrary to what I argue in this paper, that CC is a corollary of RC. The argument is based on the so-called Humean Principle. §5 shows how naïve realism can accommodate the Humean Principle, and how this relies on seeing CC as a corollary of RC. Finally, §6 consider and dismisses the idea that a revision of the Humean Principle could cause further problems to naïve realism.

1. Constitution for Naïve Realists

Let me start with the constitutive claim:

(CC): The phenomenal character of perceptual experience is (partly) constituted by the mind-independent objects in one’s surrounding and their properties.

CC is a claim about phenomenal character. Phenomenal character is philosophical jargon used to capture ‘what it is like’ to have an experience: how the experience strikes one introspectively, how things seem to be to the perceiving subject, when one undergoes an experience.

One might be tempted to see CC as a mere descriptive claim, as a sort of instruction on what to do to capture the phenomenal character of an experience.

The instruction in question is twofold:

- a) It is necessary to cite the mind-independent objects presented to you;
- b) It is sufficient to cite the mind-independent objects.

This purely descriptive or instructional reading is supported for instance by this passage by Brewer:

“So what is the Object View [...]? The basic idea is that the core subjective character of perceptual experience is given simply by citing the physical object which is its mind-independent direct object.” (Brewer 2008: 171)

However, these instructions are substantially identical to the transparency claim (Kind 2003; Soteriou 2011, 2013).¹ The transparency claim comes in a weaker and a stronger version. The strong transparency claim holds that it is not possible to attend through introspection to qualities of the experience itself, rather only through the perceptually presented objects and their properties. The weak transparency claim holds that it is possible to introspect qualities of the experience itself only by introspecting the perceptually presented objects and their properties. But, as we know, naïve realists are not the only proponents of the transparency claim, which was indeed introduced by strong intentionalists.²

Consider for instance this statement of the (strong) transparency claim by Tye:

‘Intuitively, you are directly aware of blueness and squareness as [...] features of an external surface. Now shift your gaze inward and try to become aware of your experience itself, inside you, apart from its objects. [...] The task seems impossible [...]. In turning one’s mind inward to attend to the experience, one seems to end up concentrating on what is outside again, on external features or properties’ (Tye 1995: 30).

Moreover, naïve realists often insist that we should take this talk of constitution ‘literally’ (Martin 1997: 84). Since constitution is a metaphysical notion, it seems to me, then, that CC should be taken as offering a non-causal explanation of the constitutive dependency of the phenomenal character the perceived object.³

¹ Notice that Kind and Soteriou characterise weak transparency in different ways. Here I follow Soteriou. For an overview of the debate on transparency and a discussion of further distinctions in the way the claim has been made, see Bordini (2023).

² Strong intentionalism claims that the phenomenal character of perceptual experiences is fully determined by its representational content, while weak intentionalism claims that qualia account for the phenomenal character of perceptual experiences. Notice that sometimes these positions sometimes go by different names. Here I follow the terminology adopted by Crane (2001, Ch: 3, §25), to which I also refer for a detailed discussion of the debate.

³ Alternatively, one could read CC as a causal claim, saying that the phenomenal character of a perception causally depends on the object perceived and their features in such a way that it would not be what it is, were the object absent or different. However, this can’t be what naïve realists intend, since almost anybody (irrespective of their account of

Determining the exact nature of this non-causal metaphysical relation, however, is something that is not straightforward and that proponents of naïve realism haven't clarified. There isn't, to my knowledge, any detailed discussion of what naïve realists mean by the notion of constitution and constituent employed here. However, this is a task that cannot be avoided. There isn't any obvious or univocal pre-theoretical notion of 'being a constituent of' that can be applied to CC. Instead, 'being a constituent' can be interpreted in many different ways, none of which seems immediately fitting and unproblematic.

In what follows, I will consider three metaphysical notions of constitution and the related reading of CC.

1.1 Material Constitution

Possibly the most familiar use of 'constitution' in philosophy is the notion of material constitution. The relation of material constitution is an asymmetric irreflexive relation between material objects that occupy the same space at the same time, but have different properties, like a statue of David and the lump of clay it is made of Fish (2009: 6) seems to have something along these lines in mind when he suggests that the objects are constitutive of the phenomenal character of perception in the same way as the hills are constitutive of the contours of the landscape— by actually being the contours of the landscape. This seems similar to saying that the statue actually is the lump of clay. But the notion of constitution seems unfit for our purposes, if anything because the phenomenal character of experience, unlike landscapes and statues, is not a material object, so it cannot occupy the same place as the perceived object at the same time, and share the same matter and the same parts, like constituted and constituent mater do (Wiggins 1968).

1.2 Mereological Parts

Maybe we could think that the notion of constitution in CC is used in a mereological sense. Sometimes we use 'constitute' to mean 'it is part of'. We say, for instance:

- 'the book is constituted by eight chapters'
- 'a bright living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom constitute the apartment'
- 'the five constituents of a good story are: plot, setting, character, point of view, and conflict'

Formulations of CC that stress that the object is only part of what constitutes the phenomenal character of perception might suggest this mereological reading. See for instance:

perception) would accept that the phenomenal character is causally sensitive to the objects perceived, to the point that the claim verges on the trivial.

‘The actual objects of perception (...) partly constitute one’s conscious experience, and hence determine the phenomenal character of one’s experience’. (Martin 2004: 93, italic mine).

Most metaphysicians consider mereology as a topic-neutral theory, that in principle can apply not only to material objects and events, but also to abstract entities such as properties, types, and kinds. Thus, the fact that the phenomenal character of perception is not a material entity is not per se an obstacle to this reading of CC.

However, the relation between the object of experience and the phenomenal character of experience doesn’t seem to have the right formal properties to be analysed in mereological terms. The relation of parthood is reflexive, transitive, and antisymmetric. If the relation between the object and the phenomenal character were transitive, all the parts of an object—even those that are hidden from the observer, or those that are too small to be seen—would be part of the phenomenal character. But this does not seem to be the case: the rear of the objects we see, their occluded parts, or their minuscule details are not part of the phenomenal character of our experience. Imagine you walk along the street and look at a house. At the back of the house, invisible from the street, there is a veranda with a tiled roof, a wooden floor, several potted plants and a lounge chair. Although the veranda is part of the house, it doesn’t seem like the veranda is part of the phenomenal character of your experience: no wooden floor, tiled roof, or potted plants feature in the phenomenal character of the experience.

1.3 Ontological Dependence

Another option is to understand CC as a claim about what ontologically depends on what, akin to claims such as:

- ‘Smiles ontologically depend on mouths that are smiling’
- ‘Sets ontologically depend on their members’
- ‘Properties ontologically depend on their bearers’

As Koslicki puts it,

“An entity, Φ , ontologically depends on an entity (or entities), Ψ , just in case Ψ is a constituent (or are constituents) in a real definition of Φ .” (Koslicki 2012: 190)

Some philosophers put the idea of a real definition in terms of ‘essence’. For instance, according to Fine (1995), mouths are constituents in the essence of smiles, in the sense that they are part of its real definition, that is, of the collection of propositions that are true in virtue of the identity of a particular object or objects.

Following this reading, then, CC would claim that the object is a constituent in the real definition of the phenomenal character of perception. While this reading is not problematic in the same way as the previous interpretations were, it only offers a partial explanation of the phenomenal character. We can absolutely understand in what sense the naïve realists take the object to be part of the real definition of the phenomenal character in a way that proponents of other commitments of naïve realism is that the object is not an extrinsic accident of perception, linked extrinsically to its phenomenal character (for instance via a relation of causation), but it's a constitutive aspect of the latter.⁴

However, even if we maintain that the phenomenal character of perception is one constituent of the real definition of phenomenal character, it is clear that this cannot be its full definition. If it were, the phenomenal character of perception would just be identical to the object, which is obviously false. Therefore, CC only offers a partial explanation of the phenomenal character. This suggests that, if naïve realism is taken to offer an explanation of the phenomenal character of perception, of what the conscious aspect of perception amounts to (and I assume that this is the case, or at least naïve realists take themselves to offer just that), CC either requires further additional claims, on order to complete the explanatory task, or should be taken as a corollary of another claim, which does that. My proposal is that RC gives an exhaustive metaphysical explanation of the phenomenal character, for naïve realists, and CC is a corollary of it.

2. Relations are Cheap

As we've seen, the relational claim (RC) says:

(RC) Perception is a relation to mind-independent objects in the environment and their properties.

While the scope of CC is restricted to the phenomenal character of perception, RC is often presented as a claim that is not about the phenomenal character of perception, but rather as a claim about “the essential metaphysical structure of conscious perception” (Genone 2016), or “what

⁴ This explains how naïve realism is most often understood as entailing disjunctivism: if the object is part of the essence or real definition of the phenomenal character of perception, then a hallucination, where the object is lacking, can't have the same phenomenal character. The fact that some have argued that naïve realism can be upheld without committing to disjunctivism reflects the fact that not everyone agrees on what naïve realism entails, due to the ambiguity affecting the formulation of both CC and RC. Other strategies to defend non-disjunctive versions of naïve realism rely on arguing that objects (although non-standard) are also constituents of the phenomenal character of hallucination (Raleigh 2014, Ali 2018).

essentially the event or episode [of perception] is” (Martin 2006: 361). That is to say that, for naïve realism, the essential metaphysical structure of conscious perception is relational, that the essence of perception is relational. However, it isn’t clear in what sense RC offers an account of the nature of perception.

2.1 Essentialism

An obvious reading would be one that entails an essentialist assumption. This is how Nanay (2014) understands this claim: as committing to an essentialist assumption about perception. This would be problematic, as Nanay points out. Essentialism is already controversial when it comes to natural kinds (most biologists and philosophers of biology, for instance, reject it). For psychological kinds, it seems even more problematic. First of all, psychological kinds are not things, but states, processes, events or occurrences, and it might be more controversial to think that states, processes and events form kinds, in virtue of having certain essential repeatable properties, with respect to the more straightforward idea that things form kinds. Moreover, it is not clear that it is possible to determine in a non-arbitrary way what makes a mental episode the type of episode it is.

If naïve realists were to support essentialism, they would need to offer independent arguments for the following claims:

- (1) perception is a kind individuated by an essential property;
- (2) this essential property is its being a relation between the object and the subject (rather than, say, its functional role, its underlying neurological state, its intentional content, its phenomenal character, and so on).

2.2 Real Definition

Alternatively, we could interpret this talk of ‘essence’ along the lines of Fine’s understanding of ‘essence’ as what provides the real definition of something. But if we read it this way, RC would turn out to be trivial: almost everyone would agree that being a relation to an object is part of the real definition of perception.

Relations are cheap: it is extremely easy and unproblematic to say that a relation holds between two items (or more). Almost anything can be a relation—and anyone can agree that perceptions involve a relation of some kind between the subject and the object: it could be a relation of spatiotemporal proximity, a causal relation, an intentional relation, and so on.

To be fair, although they often do not mention it in the concise formulations of RC they offer, naïve realists have qualified the relation involved in perception in at least two ways: (a) the relation in question is a relation of acquaintance, and (b) it is irreducible.

(a) Acquaintance

Naïve realists stress that the relation predicated in RC is a psychological relation. To further qualify this psychological relation, they often invoke the notion of acquaintance.

While widely used, the notion of acquaintance is rarely discussed. Its introduction dates back to Russell (1992), who talks about acquaintance as ‘knowledge of things’, in contrast with ‘knowledge of truths’. What is typically retained of the Russellian notion in the contemporary debate on perception is the idea that acquaintance is a form of non-inferential awareness. This qualification certainly helps ruling out irrelevant types of relation (such as mere spatio-temporal proximity or a causality), but is not enough to turn RC into a claim that could suffice in specifying the naïve realist commitments. One doesn’t need to commit to any particular view of perception to accept that perception acquaints us with the objects around us.

(b) Irreducibility

Brewer adds that thinking of the perceptual relation in terms of acquaintance means that it is taken to be irreducible, not analysable in terms of other types of relations, but rather it is the most specific thing we can say about perception:

“The most fundamental characterization of our perceptual relation with the physical world is a matter of conscious acquaintance between perceiving subjects and mind-independent physical objects. [...] The point is that perceptual presentation irreducibly consists in conscious acquaintance with mind-independent physical objects. It is not to be elucidated or further understood, either in terms of a relation of direct acquaintance with mind-dependent entities that are suitably related to mind-independent things, or in terms of a relation with some kind of representational content.” (Brewer 2011: 94).

This makes the view non-trivial, as it rules out all the alternative accounts of perception in terms of other relations, such as a relation to sense-data or an intentional relation to the objects (and we could add: non-reducible to the instantiation of other properties, such as qualia).

However, it doesn’t seem to me that this would suffice to appease the worries of those who can’t wrap their head around what naïve realism is committed to. One might have the impression that naïve realists are thereby rejecting all other alternative accounts of perception, but don’t really offer an alternative account. They limit themselves to saying that perception acquaints us to the object (something many other philosophers of perception would agree on) and refuse any alternative account of what this acquaintance amounts.

In the next session, I will argue that we better understand the naïve realist position if we understand RC as a claim about the phenomenal character of perception, rather than its general nature or essence. This will show that, although acquaintance is irreducible, there is much more naïve realists can say about it. Additionally, seeing RC as a claim about the phenomenal character will offer a complete ‘real definition’ of it, which CC alone wasn’t able to provide.

3. The Relationality of Phenomenal Character

Nudds presents naïve realism as follows:

“Naïve realism is the view that veridical perceptual experiences have a phenomenal character that consists of relations to mind-independent objects and features” (Nudds 2009: 334).⁵

This formulation of naïve realism differs significantly from the way Genone (2016), for instance, presents RC. For Nudds, RC is a claim about the phenomenal character of experience. It is noteworthy that Nudds here is not presenting an unorthodox version of naïve realism, rather he means to offer a broad characterisation of naïve realism. I think that Nudds is right on this: although most naïve realists do not explicitly formulate RC as a claim about phenomenal character, and instead talk about the essence of perception, when they say things like “We must think at the fabric of [perceptual] consciousness as relational” (Martin 2004: 64), this is what they actually mean.

I propose that we should reformulate RC as follows:

RC*: The phenomenal character of perception amounts to the obtaining of a relation with the objects perceived. But if this is the case, why aren’t naïve realists explicitly presenting RC as a claim about the phenomenal character of perception, and instead talk about the essential or fundamental nature of perception? And most importantly, what does it mean for the phenomenal character to be the obtaining of a relation?

In order to answer both questions, it is useful to look at the following passage by Martin:

“In ascribing consciousness to a creature, we are thereby ascribing to it a point of view or a perspective on the world. This is a feature that the naïve realist about perception in

⁵ Similarly, Boyd Millar (who, unlike Nudds, is not a sympathiser of naïve realism) claims: “Naïve realism is the view that when you perceive a particular object, the phenomenology of your perceptual experience is constituted by your standing in the acquaintance relation to that object and certain of its properties.” (Millar 2015: 607).

particular will want to stress, although its claim on us is recognised much more widely. From a subject's perspective experience is a matter (at least in part) of various objects being apparent to it, some part of the actual world making an appearance to one. The naïve realist, at least in the case of veridical perception, wishes us to understand this way of talking literally: veridical perceptual experience is constituted through one standing in a relation of awareness to the object of perception." (Martin 2006, italic mine)

This passage makes clear that Martin, like many other naïve realists, is primarily interested in experience 'from a subject's perspective', or what makes perception sensorily conscious. When they talk about perception, they always stress that they are interested in conscious perception, considered as conscious— and what makes perception conscious, in other words in its phenomenal character.⁶ Thus, their core commitment (whether expressed by CC or RC) concerns what makes an experience subjectively conscious, or to use well-established philosophical jargon, its phenomenal character.

This also explains the somehow puzzling use of an essentialist vocabulary that we discussed in the previous section. Rather than revealing the commitment to essentialist assumptions, it simply marks the observation that the phenomenal character is essential to conscious experience, in the trivial sense that it is what makes perception conscious.

RC* can, thus, be formalised as follows:

Phenomenal Character of Experience = $s R o$,

where:

- s is the perceiving subject;
- R is a dyadic relation that can be described as 'occupying a point of view on' or 'having a perceptual perspective on', or 'being acquainted with';
- o is a mind-independent object;
- and the complex (sRo) is the obtaining of a relation between s and o , which is arguably a relational fact (the fact that s and o are so related).

⁶ 'Consciousness' and 'phenomenal character' are not always used as synonymous, but I take it that, in the debate I am considering, 'phenomenal character' is taken to refer to the conscious aspect of perception (sometimes called 'conscious character'), to what it is like for the subject to undergo the experience. Thus, for the current purposes, what makes perception conscious is at least coextensive with its phenomenal character.

‘Object’ here should be conceived very broadly: it includes anything that can be perceived, and could include properties, events, relations, and processes, alongside middle-sized dry goods. Indeed, it might be appropriate to replace the term ‘object’ with ‘scene’. This term has also the benefit of implicitly referring to the notion of point of view (a scene is a portion of the world from someone’s perspective). However, for simplicity, I will keep talking about ‘objects’ in what follows.

The phenomenology of one’s experience is determined by the object or scene in front of one, facts about the subject’s perceptual system, and the details of what form the relation of having a point of view on x takes in that specific occasion.

For R is not monolithic: depending on what sense modalities are involved, where the subject is located with respect to the object will make a difference to the phenomenal character.

When I look at the yoga ball in my home office, the phenomenal character of my experience is partly determined by the scene in front of me: this includes the lighting conditions, the background partly constituted by the white floor tiles and partly by the darkness of the evening visible from the window and enclosed in the window frame, which makes the light blueness of the ball stand out more in certain places.

The borders of the ball are somehow blurry, which is partly due to the fact that my old prescription glasses don’t correct entirely my short-sightedness (a fact that has to do with me, the perceiver) and partly due to my glasses being a bit dirty after a long day of toughing my face while writing (a fact that has to do with the object of perception: the lenses of my glasses are part of the scene I perceive, although I am often unaware of it). The fact that I see only a portion of the ball, that the ball looks slightly distorted, and that the ball occludes part of the window depends on the specifics of how the perceptual relation obtains in this case, due to my relative position to the ball and the window. Thus, RC offers the missing elements in the explanation of the nature of the phenomenal character, with a proper characterization of its ‘real definition’, something that CC alone can’t provide, as I argued at the end of §2.2.

The discussion above also makes manifest that CC is a corollary of RC (reformulated as per RC*). If having a conscious perceptual experience is a matter of having a point of view on the object, it is natural to think that the object is a constituent of it, because there can’t be a point of view without an object the experience is a point of view on. CC follows from RC, combined with the basic metaphysical assumptions that relations cannot obtain in the absence of one of its terms.⁷

⁷ For a defence of the claim that relational facts can’t change their relation-constituents, see, for instance, Fine (2000: 5).

Objects are constituents of the phenomenal character inasmuch as the phenomenal character amounts to being related to them.

While this makes it clear that the object of perception is only part of what constitutes the phenomenal character, this proposal also makes sense of the fact that the object does play a special, prominent role, in constituting the phenomenal character, as the phenomenon of transparency attests: it is not possible for me to attend the phenomenal character of my experience and other features of my experience without thereby attending to the objects that I perceive. This is obviously not the case for my perceptual system or the lighting conditions. The notion of a point of view accommodates this difference: my experience is a point of view on the ball, not on my visual system.

4. Shall Naïve Realists Abandon CC?

In the last section, I argued that naïve realists are best understood as committed to both CC and RC and that we should understand CC as a corollary of RC. Here I want to present an objection to CC, which threatens to be especially pernicious to naïve realism if we accept what I just argued for. For, if this objection to CC proves to be successful, one would be left with only two options: (a) relinquishing naïve realism in toto, or (b) revising naïve realism in a way that doesn't commit to CC.

If what I argued above is correct (that is: if naïve realists are committed to both CC and RC, and CC is better understood as a corollary of RC), any objection to CC would count as enough of a reason to abandon naïve realism.

However, in the face of compelling objections to CC, a proponent of naïve realism might try to save the view by reformulating it in a way that doesn't commit to CC. This is in principle a viable option: corollaries, in fact, follow from a claim, given other reasonable assumptions. If this is the case, it is possible that the allegedly reasonable assumption that one should accept in conjunction with RC in order for CC to follow is not as reasonable as it seems and should and could be resisted. One could for instance question the metaphysical assumptions discussed in the previous section concerning the relation between relational facts and objects involved in it. However, none of these assumptions are easily relinquished. Fortunately for naïve realists, they do not need to resort to that strategy: as I will argue in what follows, the objection falls through.

The objection to CC in question emerges from pointing out an alleged tension between, on one hand, the naïve realist claim that the object of perception plays a constitutive role in determining the phenomenal character of perception (CC) and, on the other hand, the possibility for the same object to play a causal role.

This tension arises from the acceptance of a simple idea about causes and effects, often referred to in the literature as the ‘Humean Principle’. As Strawson puts it, this is the idea that “only distinct natural items (‘distinct existences’) can be causally connected” (Strawson 1998: 314; *italics in original*).⁸ Only things that exist independently of one another can be causally connected.

As we’ve seen in §1.3, the object is not an extrinsic accident of perception: its presence is a necessary ontological constituent of perceptual phenomenal character. But this seems to ban the object of perception from playing a causal role in determining the phenomenal character of perception. This gives rise to an inconstant triad:

1. Humean Principle (HP): Only distinct natural items (‘distinct existences’) can be causally connected;
2. Causal Intuition (CI): the distal object plays a role in the causal process leading to perception;
3. Naïve Realist Constitutive Claim (CC): The object partly constitutes the phenomenal character of the experience, in such a way that the occurrence of the perception requires the existence of the object.

In order to preserve CC, a naïve realist should have to relinquish either the Causal Intuition or the Humean Principle. In what follows I will explore the option of forsaking the former, to then turn to the latter in the next section. A naïve realist might bite the bullet and simply forsake the Causal Intuition, the idea that the object of perception plays a causal role in determining the conscious perceptual experience. While rejecting the idea that the object plays a role in the perceptual process leading to the conscious perception is very implausible, one could disjoin the conscious aspect of the experience from other aspects of it (its functional role, or its

⁸ Interestingly, here Strawson uses this idea to object to Snowdon (1998). In this paper, Snowdon suggests that a naïve realist view, according to which “the visible facts are constituents of the experience” (Snowdon 1998: 302) can secure a non-accidental link between the object and perception better than the causal link posited by causal theories of perception. Against Snowdon, Strawson argues that the idea that “natural items themselves could be logically linked is nonsense, a category howler” (Strawson 1998: 314): only things capable of truth and falsity can be logically connected. Thus, only a description of perception can be said to entail the existence of the object, not perception itself. Here Strawson fails to see that the relation between perception (or its phenomenal character) is not merely logical, but metaphysical, in the sense I elucidated in §1.3 and 3.

representational content,⁹ etc.), and claim that the distal object causes the latter aspects of perception, but it doesn't play any role in causally determining its phenomenal character (while, of course, still maintaining that it plays a non-causal constitutive role in determining its phenomenal character).

Denying the Causal Intuition while preserving a causal role for the object in determining aspects of perception which are not the phenomenal character is a position defended by Burge (2010), although, obviously, not as a strategy to safeguard naïve realism. Indeed, it is precisely the fact that Burge is not a naïve realist that opens up for him the possibility of rejecting CI. In fact, he is committed to denying that the phenomenal character of experience plays any role in securing the objective import of perception, i.e. in “provid[ing] us the basis for immediate non-inferential judgments about mind-independent objects and some of their mind-independent properties”(Eilan 2017: 289). As Eilan explains, for Burge, the objective import of perception is entirely due to the fact that the perceived object causes the occurrence of a perceptual state with a representational content. Thus, he can disjoin the causal role played by the object of perception from its phenomenal character. But this option is hardly available to a relationalist, who wants to make the phenomenal character responsible for the objective purport of perception, and for which the representational content (if any) and/or the functional role of perception depend on its phenomenal character (see Eilan 2017).

Alternatively, one may challenge CI by appealing to Davidson's (1967) idea that objects are not in the business of causing, because only events can be causes. What plays a causal role in determining the phenomenal character of the experience are facts, which possibly have to do with the object reflecting light which is directed in the subject's retina. The object can then play a constitutive role without running the risk of violating HP. However, it is not clear that this is enough to exclude that objects play any causal role with respect to the conscious perception: they can play a causal role as constituents of facts. Moreover, among things one can see, there are events. And naïve realism is committed to claiming that, in the case of the perception of events, the event also partly constitutes the phenomenal character of the experience (Soteriou 2011; 2013: 89). But one could hardly deny that the event seen is among the causes of S's seeing the event on

⁹ Naïve realism is not incompatible with claiming that perception has a representational content. It is incompatible with claiming that the phenomenal character is determined by the representational content. Therefore, even a naïve realist might allow for perception to have a representational content (see Locatelli and Wilson 2017).

the grounds of a Davidson-inspired argument, since events are indeed in the business of causing. It seems, thus, that rejecting CI would be very difficult for naïve realists.

5. The Humean Principle

Do we have grounds to reject the Humean Principle (HP)? To answer this question, we need to understand what it means exactly. Strawson has a useful discussion of the principle in the context of his defence of the causal theory of perception. Strawson is preoccupied with an apparent tension between the causal theory and the intuition that, for something to count as perception, it must be the case that the object seen exists: an argument that is specular to the argument against naïve realism discussed here.

Strawson suggests that HP allows for a logical and a metaphysical reading:

- a. HPL: Cause and effect involved in a causal relation are logically distinct existences, so it cannot be the case that the effect logically requires the existence of the cause to obtain;
- b. HPM: Cause and effect involved in a causal relation are logically distinct existences, so it cannot be the case that the effect metaphysically requires the existence of the cause to obtain.

In the context of his defence of the causal theory of perception, Strawson considers HPL and argues that it is clearly false. Since only things capable of truth or falsity can be logically connected, HPL applies to descriptions of items (see Strawson 1998: 314). But all sorts of things can be described in such a way that the truth of that description entails the truth of the description of their cause. The truth of ‘Gibbon is the historian of the Roman Empire’, Strawson says, entails the truth of ‘The Roman Empire has existed’: one logically entails the other. Yet, the facts that constitute what is known as Roman Empire are causally connected in some ways to Gibbon’s writing them (Strawson 1988: 461). Mary’s annoyance at Paul’s chattering is caused by Paul’s chattering and the truth of ‘Mary’s annoyed by Paul’s chattering’ logically entails the truth of ‘Paul is chattering’.

If it has to have any bite at all, Strawson argues, HP should be understood in metaphysical terms, as per HPM. But, according to Strawson, even HPM is not directly in tension with the causal theory of perception. The apparent inconsistency involves the following triad, in which the Causal Intuition we discussed above is replaced by the Causal Theory and Naïve Realism is replaced by the Naïve Realist Intuition:

1. Humean Principle: cause and effect involved in a causal relation are distinct existences;

2. Causal Theory: it is a necessary condition for a mental occurrence to count as perception that the perception is caused by the object perceived;
3. Naïve Realist Intuition: The correctness of the description of a perceptual experience as the perception of a certain physical object logically requires the existence of that object.

If we understand the Humean Principle in metaphysical terms—Strawson argues— the tension disappears, because the naïve realist intuition remains silent with respect to the metaphysics of perception and what is metaphysically required for one to perceive, and hence compatible with HPM.

The fact that an event is described correctly as a perception only if it is true that the object seen exists does not make the perception metaphysically dependent on the object:

“The fact that the truth of a description of one item logically requires the truth of the existence of another has no force at all to show that the items in question are not distinct natural existences, capable of being causally linked.” (Strawson 1998: 314, italics in original)

Strawson’s defensive strategy relies on pointing out that the naïve realist intuition is silent with respect to metaphysics. This makes it highly unsuitable for the real naïve realists. As I argued above, naïve realists must commit to a metaphysical dependence between the object and perception (more specifically, its phenomenal character). The naïve realist does not simply say, as Strawson argues, that the truth of a description of perception requires the existence of the perceived object. This is something anyone who accepts that perceiving is a factive verb would accept, without committing to the nature of perception itself.

Naïve realists must claim that there is a metaphysical dependency between perception and its object. Thus, for the naïve realist, focusing on HPM cannot dissolve the inconsistency of the triad. If anything, it makes the inconsistency more obvious, because both HPM and NR are formulated in metaphysical terms.

We are now faced with the following triad:

1. (HPM): Cause and effect involved in a causal relation are logically distinct existences, so it cannot be the case that the effect metaphysically requires the existence of the cause to obtain;
2. (CI): The distal object plays a role in the causal process leading to perception,
3. (NR): The object partly constitutes the phenomenal character of the experience.

As we’ve seen in the previous section, contrary to Burge, the naïve realist is not in a position to deny CI nor, contrary to Strawson, can she defuse the tension with HPM.

The best hopes lie in rejecting HPM, or at least in reducing its scope in a way that doesn't make CI and naïve realism mutually exclusive.

Child (1992) offers some reason for thinking that there is a long list of exceptions to HP: cases that are both related by a causal relation and by a metaphysical relation of constitution, such as cases of events that are part of a bigger event and also the cause of it. His favourite example is the bombing of Pearl Harbour, which is both the cause of the Pacific War and a part of it (Child 1992: 310). The Pacific War is not metaphysically independent of the bombing of Pearl Harbour: it wouldn't be the event that it is considered to be if the bombing of Pearl Harbour wasn't part of it. However, it remains true that Pearl Harbour caused the Pacific War.

Child suggests that we should understand perception along these lines, treating the relation of constitution as a part-whole relation, where the object is a mereological part of the perceptual experience. An aspect of our understanding of the bombing of Pearl Harbour as part of the Pacific War is that we think of the Pacific War as unfolding over a period of time that starts with the bombing of Pearl Harbour.

In §1.2 I argued that the mereological understanding of constitution is unfit for CC. We can now add that it remains so even if we think of mereological parts in terms of temporal parts, along the lines suggested by Child. In fact, we do not think that the event of perception begins at the time the object (or the event) perceived begins to exist. An obvious example of this is the perception of stars that have extinguished by the time their light reaches us: we do not think that the perception began when the star was formed, nor do we think it began at the time the star emitted the light that travels towards us and is eventually seen. This is true even if we consider events, rather than objects. When one sees a comet crossing the sky, we do not think that the seeing begins at the time the comet passes close to the sun, heats up, and begins to emit gas—again an event which occurs at least a few minutes before the light from the burning reaches Earth. This indicates that the mereological model is not particularly helpful in understanding the relation between perception and its object.

I suggest that we should think of perception as constituting an exception to HPM on a different ground. Another class of exceptions to HPM are relational event.

Take for instance a clam being attached to a rock. This is a relational fact, involving a two-terms function (being attached to), a clam and a rock. The obtaining of the relation is caused by the clam itself. However, the clam is one of the terms of this relational fact and, as such, it is a constitutive part of it. As we've seen in §3, a relational fact cannot obtain if all its terms are not in place. Thus, the relation in question could not be the relation it is, were the clam not there.

But if this is true for the clam being attached to the rock, it is also true of the phenomenal character, if we understand it, as I argued in §3 as a relational fact. Thus, we can maintain without contradiction that:

o causes (sRo),

where:

- ‘o’ is an object,
- ‘s’ is a subject,
- And ‘R’ is a relation of acquaintance.

If we understand perceptions as relations, there is no difficulty in accepting that an object causes a perception and that, nonetheless, the perception is a relation to this object and, as such, metaphysically depends on it.

6. Revised Humean Principle and Conclusions

One might accept that we should grant the possibility that causes are constitutive elements of their effect in the case of relational events. Still, one might nonetheless think that this doesn't really neutralise HPM, but rather more modestly calls for a reformulation of it—a reformulation that might still threaten naïve realism.

In fact, the intuition behind HPM runs deeper and might be formulated as follows:

HPM*: A, relational fact F_1 involving the object O might be caused by O only at the condition that it obtains in virtue of the obtaining of another fact F_2 , whose existence is, in turn, metaphysically independent of O.

For instance, one might think that the relational fact of a ship being moored to the dock's bollard is indeed caused by the bollard: without a bollard to which a rope can be attached, the ship could not be moored. However, being moored to the bollard doesn't obtain simply in virtue of the bollard being there: it obtains in virtue of the sailor throwing the rope: a fact that is metaphysically independent of the dock.

An opponent of naïve realism may see this as evidence that perception, although understood in some sense as relational, needs to involve a non-relational occurrence, an experience which is metaphysically independent of the object. This means that one could in principle have the very same experience with the same phenomenal character, even in the absence of the relevant object, when one hallucinates. This may be taken to confirm that, contrary to what naïve realists claim, the object of perception is not, in fact, constitutive to its phenomenal character.

However, naïve realists could retort that the intermediate event in virtue of which the perception obtains is not a psychological event. Indeed, we should be wary of postulating this strange psychological intermediate experience, when there is a perfectly good candidate available for playing this intermediate causal role: the neural process or state which causes the perception. The obvious thing to say for the naïve realist is that the object causes the neural process or state, an event that is metaphysically independent of the object, and in turn the neural occurrence causes the obtaining of a psychological relation to the object to which perception amounts to.¹⁰

In this view, the object does play a role in causally determining the phenomenal character of perception, as per CI, but does so only in virtue of causing an event which is metaphysically independent from it, in agreement with HPM*.¹¹

To summarise, my discussion made clear how the claims with which naïve realism is usually characterised—the relational claim and the constitutive claim—are not fully clarified by naïve realists, at least not explicitly. This leaves readers uncertain as to what the relation between the two claims is, and paves the way to a host of misinterpretations of and confusion about the view. I argued that naïve realism should be understood as committed to, first and foremost, RC, which should be understood as a claim about the phenomenal character of perception, rather than about

¹⁰ The idea that the intermediate cause (the brain state) should not be confused with a psychological event goes back to Hinton (1973: 75–87).

¹¹ One might object that this leaves open a further question. If one accepts that the perception is directly caused by the brain state, and the brain state itself could occur in the absence of the object, it is tempting to think that the effect produced by the brain state should itself be independent of the object. But this would be a different strand of objection from the one I am concerned with here, and one that has been already largely dealt with by naïve realists and I don't have space to rehearse here (see in particular Fish 2009 and Martin 2004; 2006). There is no good reason to think that the same brain state could not give rise to an event which is most appropriately characterised disjunctively, as either a perception (the obtaining of a relation with the object) or a hallucination (which only seems a perception). This is motivated idea through an appeal to either a local supervenience principle, or the 'same proximate cause same effect' principle. However, locally supervenience is highly disputable (see Fish 2009 for a discussion) and the same proximate cause same immediate effect principle, if at all acceptable, should allow for background conditions and non-causal constitutive elements affecting the nature of the outcome of the proximate cause (see Martin 2004, 2006 for a discussion).

its nature, structure or essence (whatever that means). CC, on the other hand, should be understood as a corollary of RC.

This doesn't only offer a better characterisation of how naïve realists understand phenomenal character: it also helps us understand how we can claim that the object of perception is a constitutive element of perception, while simultaneously allowing for it to play a causal role in determining perception.

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