Naïve Realism and Phenomenal Overlap

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What it is like to see a scarlet bus is quite similar to what it is like to see a maroon bus. That is, the experience you undergo when you see a red bus is *phenomenally* similar to the experience you undergo when you see a maroon bus. There are, then, phenomenal similarity relations that hold between various experiences—i.e. similarity relations that hold in virtue of experiences' phenomenal characters.

Neil Mehta (2014) argues that *naïve realism*—a view characterised in the next section—delivers implausible results about phenomenal similarity. In broad strokes, the problem is that naïve realism makes false predictions about which experiences are phenomenally similar. More precisely, certain experiences are, allegedly, in no way phenomenally similar, however, naïve realism predicts that they are phenomenally similar. Hence, naïve realism is false. Mehta's argument is significant because it departs from extant arguments against naïve realism: it does not rely on empirical data; it does not argue against naïve realism's corollary: *disjunctivism*; and it does not make use of illusion or hallucination.[1] It therefore reveals a new kind of argument to which the naïve realist must respond.

Some have already attempted to respond to the argument (French and Gomes 2016), but with little success.[2] Still, naïve realists needn't despair. As I see it, the real problem with Mehta's argument is that the experiences he cites *are* phenomenally similar. As I will show, there is no easy way to fix this defect. Moreover, there are slightly *weaker* versions of naïve realism that are immune to Mehta's argument. The upshot: even if some iteration of Mehta's argument is sound, the most that it can show is that *one* version of naïve realism is false.

The plan is as follows. In Sect. 1 I carefully articulate naïve realism. Then, in Sect. 2, I clarify Mehta's argument against it. Finally, in Sect. 3, I spell out why Mehta's argument and other arguments like it do not succeed in extinguishing naïve realism.

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1 For a recent empirical argument against naïve realism, see Adam Pautz (2016).

2 As Mehta and Ganson (2016) point out, French and Gomes's objections rest on a misunderstanding of Mehta's argument. I address this in Sect. 3.

1. Naïve realism

Mehta's target is what he calls *phenomenal particularism*. This is the thesis that "external particulars—perhaps including external objects, events, masses, surfaces, and property/relation instantiations—are sometimes part of the phenomenal character of experience" (2014, 311). Mehta targets a specific version of phenomenal particularism—a version commonly known as *naïve realism*. It is best if we begin by letting those who endorse naïve realism state the thesis in their own terms.

> According to naïve realism, the actual objects of perception, the external things such as trees, tables and rainbows, which one can perceive, and the properties which they can manifest to one when perceived, partly constitute one's conscious experience, and hence determine the phenomenal character of one's experience. (Martin 2009, 93)

> As I see it, the core subjective character of perceptual experience is simply constituted by the objects presented in that experience…These direct objects are the persisting mind-independent physical objects we all know and love. (Brewer 2007, 89)

> Naïve realism says that the phenomenal character of your experience, as you look around the room, is constituted by the actual layout of the room itself: which particular objects are there, their intrinsic properties, such as colour and shape, and how they are arranged in relation to one another and to you. (Campbell 2002, 116)

According to the above passages, naïve realism is a thesis about the subjective or phenomenal character of perceptual experiences. The *phenomenal character* of an experience is what it is like to undergo that experience. For example, there is something it is like to touch sand paper, feel a pain in one's toe, or taste a ripe peach. What it is like in each case is the phenomenal character of the experience you undergo. Note, however, that naïve realism is not intended to be a thesis about all perceptual experiences. It is tacitly restricted to veridical perceptual experiences. A *veridical* perceptual experience is one in which, roughly, the subject of the experience perceives the world as it is. To give a simple example, when I see an apple, and the apple looks red and round to me, my experience is veridical if and only the apple I see is, in fact, red and round. To a first approximation, then, we can say that the core thesis of naïve realism is that the phenomenal character of a veridical perceptual experience is constituted by the external objects and property instances *perceived* by the subject of the experience. As we might put it, the phenomenal character of a veridical experience has external objects and property instances as *elements*. Moreover, according to naïve realism, a veridical experience has external objects and property instances as elements of its phenomenal character *in virtue of* the fact that the

subject of the experience perceives them.[3] Let us, then, take the following to be the official statement of naïve realism.

> *Naïve Realism* - For any veridical perceptual experience *e*, the phenomenal character of *e* has external objects and external property instances as elements in virtue of the subject of *e* perceiving those objects and property instances.[4]

To make the view concrete, consider the experience you undergo when you (veridically) see a bright red apple. According to naïve realism, what it is like to undergo this experience is constituted by the apple and what *it* (the apple) is like. The phenomenal character of the experience has the apple, its perceptible colour, shape, and so on as elements. Moreover, according to the naïve realist, it has them as elements in virtue of the fact that you *see* them.

Why would one endorse naïve realism? There are many reasons. One reason is that naïve realism seems to be the view that best articulates how perceptual experience strikes us upon reflection (Martin 2002; Fish 2009; Hellie 2007; Pautz 2016). To see this, suppose again that you are veridically seeing a red apple. Upon reflection, you might think that it seems *obvious* that the character of this experience is wholly constituted by some concrete item and its properties. Moreover, it might seem equally obvious that the con-

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[3] This is intended to be a distinctive feature of naïve realism that serves to differentiate it from nearby representationalist alternatives. These nearby representationalist alternatives can allow that external objects and properties are elements of an experience's phenomenal character. However, they will claim that they are elements of phenomenal character in virtue of the subject of the experience representing them.

[4] It is important to recognise that there are other theses that go by the name 'naïve realism' and that Mehta's objection does not target them—at least it is not meant to target them. I have in mind versions of naïve realism that are not formulated in terms of 'phenomenal character' at all. At points, Martin has spelled out naïve realism using the notion of fundamentality. According to this formulation, when one undergoes a veridical perceptual experience, "some of the objects of perception—the concrete individuals, their properties, the events these partake in—are constituents of the experience. No experience like this, no experience of fundamentally the same kind, could have occurred had no appropriate candidate for awareness existed" (Martin 2004, 39). We can call this fundamental kind naïve realism. One might understand this thesis as claiming, roughly, that there is some fundamental experiential kind such that no veridical perceptual experience and hallucinatory experience are both of that kind. It is now recognised, both by naïve realists and their opponents, that this is compatible with several views of phenomenal character. In particular, one can consistently maintain (1) that there is some fundamental experiential kind unique to veridical perceptual experiences and (2) that naïve realism (as discussed in the text) is false (Fish 2009, 14–15; Mehta 2014, 323–328). Accordingly, fundamental kind naïve realism, understood in this way, does not entail the version of naïve realism discussed in the text. However, much depends on how one understands the term 'fundamental experiential kind'. Indeed, one might take a token experience's fundamental experiential kind to consist in, among other things, the facts in virtue of which the experience has its phenomenal character. Suitably understood, this reading of fundamental kind naïve realism will entail the version of naïve realism discussed in the text. If so, then Mehta's objection, if successful, shows that fundamental kind naïve realism is false—at least when read in this second way.

crete item is located in front of you in public space. Many (though not all) take this to strongly suggest that something like naïve realism is true.[5] If nothing else, it makes the view worthy of serious consideration.

2. The argument from phenomenal overlap

In the abstract, Mehta's objection to naïve realism is simple: naïve realism makes false predictions about which experiences are phenomenally similar. To show this, Mehta relies on an intuition about the following case:

> WINE: Suppose that at time *t1* you have a veridical visual experience of wine in a glass before you. Call this experience E1. In having this experience, there is a thing you perceive, namely, body of wine B. Now suppose that at *t2* you have a veridical tactile experience of the same body of wine when it is spilled in your lap. Call this experience E2. Again, in having this experience, you perceive the same body of wine B. (2014: 318–319)

Mehta claims that, intuitively, these "completely successful perceptual experiences…have no phenomenal similarity" (2014, 318). It is not just that the experiences are phenomenally quite different. Rather, it is that what it is like to see the body of wine is, allegedly, *in no way similar* to what it is like to feel the wine spilt on one's lap. However, it seems that naïve realism must say otherwise. Mehta correctly points out that since both experiences are veridical, and you perceive B when undergoing each, the naïve realist "should hold that the same particular body of wine is part of [or an element of] the phenomenal character of both experiences" (Ibid., 319). Let us say that two experiences *phenomenally overlap* if and only if those experiences' phenomenal characters share a phenomenal element. The problem: if E1 and E2 phenomenally overlap, then E1 and E2 are phenomenally similar. More carefully, the naïve realist predicts a similarity between E1 and E2: they both have B as an element of their phenomenal characters. Moreover, this is a phenomenal similarity, that is to say, a similarity between E1 and E2 that holds in virtue of their phenomenal characters. Accordingly, naïve realism predicts that E1 and E2 are phenomenally similar.

But if all this is right, then naïve realism is false. We can summarise Mehta's argument in the following way:

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[5] I choose this argument because it the one that I find most compelling. However, I make the parenthetical qualification because it is a matter of dispute, even among naïve realists, whether this is a good argument. See Martin (2002) for criticism of the argument and Fish (2009, 3–28) for a summary of this and other arguments for naïve realism.

A1. E1 and E2 are not phenomenally similar.

A2. If naïve realism is true, then E1 and E2 are phenomenally similar.

CA. So naïve realism is false.

In other words, "[naïve realism] mistakenly predicts at least one phenomenal similarity where there are none" (Mehta and Ganson 2016). Let us call this *the Argument from Phenomenal Overlap*.

One unadvertised advantage of the Argument deserves recognition. The Argument from Phenomenal Overlap avoids cumbersome discussions of naïve realism's corollary: disjunctivism. Roughly and briefly, the idea behind disjunctivism is this. In cases of total hallucination, we do not veridically perceive the world, but seem to be in states with phenomenal character nonetheless. There is, for example, something it is like to hallucinate a red apple. But since we do not perceive anything in total hallucination, the naïve realist must explain the phenomenal character of hallucination in a very different way than he explained the phenomenal character of veridical perception.[6]Schematically, he must say that for a subject to be in a state with phenomenal character is *either* for the subject to veridically perceive the world *or* for the subject to be in some other state (hence the name 'disjunctivism'). Many objections to naïve realism target the implausibility of disjunctivism. Of course, disjunctivism comes in a bewildering number of varieties (Pautz 2010, 260–265). Successfully objecting to naïve realism on the grounds that disjunctivism is implausible requires seriously engaging with each variety. But if Mehta's argument succeeds, then we may rule out naïve realism without ever having to consider disjunctivism. That, I think, is a serious practical advantage of the Argument for those inclined to reject naïve realism.

3. Is phenomenal overlap really a problem?

Despite its novelty and simplicity, as formulated by Mehta, the Argument from Phenomenal Overlap does not succeed.[7] First, even if successful, some versions of naïve realism are immune to it. Accordingly, the worst the argument can do is force the naïve realist to retreat to a slightly weaker position. Second, at least one of the Argument's premises is false. Specifically, A1 is false because Mehta relies on a pair of experiences that are phenomenally similar. There are several revisions that Mehta might make to the argument, but, as I will show, none of them are plausible.

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[6] Another option for the naïve realist is to deny that hallucinations have phenomenal character. See Fish (2009).

[7] Some preliminary objections are discussed in Mehta (2014). I do not discuss them here since I think Mehta has adequately addressed them.

3.1 Modest naïve realism

We should begin by acknowledging that the Argument from Phenomenal Overlap only targets a subset of naïve realist views. Specifically, the only versions of naïve realism affected are those that include particular *objects* as elements of phenomenal character. But it is open to the naïve realist to endorse a more modest claim. For example, she might endorse:

> *Modest Naïve Realism* - For any veridical perceptual experience *e*, the phenomenal character of *e* has external property instances as elements in virtue of the subject of *e* perceiving those property instances.

Modest naïve realism is not affected by the Argument from Phenomenal Overlap or analogous arguments. Mehta's move is to force the naïve realist into saying that E1 and E2 are phenomenally similar by pointing to the fact that they are committed to the experiences phenomenally overlapping with respect to B. However, the modest naïve realist is *not* committed to saying that B is an element of either experience's phenomenal character. Accordingly, she is not committed to saying that E1 and E2 phenomenally overlap with respect to B. As a result, Mehta cannot force the modest naïve realist to say that E1 and E2 are phenomenally similar due to phenomenally overlapping with respect to B. This means that even if the Argument from Phenomenal Overlap rules out more ambitious versions of naïve realism, the naïve realist may happily retreat to more a more modest, more secure position.

Mehta might reply that modest naïve realism is unmotivated. But this is not so. For example, Fish (2009) points out that it is phenomenologically plausible that property instances are elements of phenomenal character. Fish notes that when we see the Pacific Ocean, we may become transfixed by the blue *of the Pacific Ocean*. Similarly, when we see the Taj Mahal, we may attend to the pink *of the Taj Mahal*. This suggests that

> when we see an object—such as the Pacific Ocean or the Taj Mahal—it is not simply blueness or pinkness that we are aware of, but specific instances of blueness and pinkness: the blueness of the Pacific Ocean and the pinkness of the Taj Mahal. (23)

Similarly, Logue (2012) puts forward an argument on the basis of the epistemic role of experience that perceived property instances are elements phenomenal character. So modest naïve realism is not unmotivated. There are good (though defeasible) reasons to think that it is true. In short, there is a motivated version of naïve realism that survives the Argument from Phenomenal Overlap.

The upshot is this. Because of the limited scope of the Argument, it will not be able to tell us whether all versions of naïve realism are false. At most, it will tell us

whether the naïve realist must retreat to modest naïve realism. I now turn to the question of whether the Argument is successful in this endeavour.

3.2 Is the argument from phenomenal overlap sound?

A recent challenge to the Argument comes from French and Gomes (2016). They interpret Mehta as claiming that the naïve realist is committed to saying that phenomenal character of E1 is the same as the phenomenal character of E2. But they then claim that "naïve realism is not committed to the claim that sameness of external particular entails sameness of phenomenal character. Thus Mehta's argument against naïve realism fails" (459). French and Gomes's challenge, however, rests on a confusion. Mehta's argument does not make use of the premise that E1 and E2 have the same phenomenal character. As pointed out by Mehta and Ganson (2016), Mehta's argument merely requires that the naïve realist is committed to their phenomenal characters being similar. So French and Gomes's objection simply misses the mark.

As I see it, the real problem with Mehta's argument is that A1 is false. E1 and E2 are phenomenally similar. First, observe that even though they are phenomenally quite different, E1 and E2 are *trivially* phenomenally similar. All experiences are trivially phenomenally similar in virtue of having phenomenal character at all. However, perhaps what Mehta intends to say is that E1 and E2 are in no way *non-trivially* phenomenally similar. But that is not true either. Both E1 and E2 are *spatial* experiences in the sense that their phenomenal characters have spatial properties as elements. E1 presents the wine as being spatially located before the subject. E2 presents the wine as being spatially located in the subject's lap. But if both their phenomenal characters include spatial properties (in particular, relatively determinate spatial location properties), then that is a non-trivial phenomenal similarity that holds between them. Even when stated carefully, A1 just seems false.

Perhaps, you might think, Mehta could pick a different pair of experiences—one visual, the other tactile—to make his point. But the problem is a general one. All visual and tactile experiences are, in some respect or another, spatial. Hence, any visual-tactile experience pair (or any pair of visual experiences or pair of tactile experiences) will exhibit phenomenal similarity in virtue of its members being spatial experiences.[8]

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[8] Alternatively, Mehta might reply that phenomenal similarity entails phenomenal overlap. That is, necessarily, two experiences are phenomenally similar only if they phenomenally overlap. Since there is no spatial property that is common to E1 and E2's phenomenal characters (or we could at least describe a relevantly similar case in which this is so), they are not phenomenally similar. This reply is mistaken: phenomenal similarity does not entail phenomenal overlap. Consider a different example involving two pain experiences. The first experience A is an experience of a fully determinate pain quality Q1 in one's foot (maybe it is a throbbing pain of some kind). The second experience B is of a fully determinate pain quality Q2 in one's hand (maybe it is a burning pain of some kind). What it is like to undergo A is similar in certain respects to what it is like to

Instead, Mehta might point to other experiences of the wine in different sense modalities. In trying to support A1, Mehta invites us to

> consider other experiences of that very wine that might have no phenomenal similarity to my visual experience: my auditory experience of the wine dribbling to the floor, my olfactory experience of the wine and its rich aromas, and so forth. (2014, 319)

In light of this, Mehta might attempt to pair E1 (or E2 for that matter) with another experience that is an experience of the wine but is, nonetheless, not phenomenally similar to E1. For example, he might claim that what it is like to hear the wine dribbling to the floor is not at all similar to what it is like to see the wine. Nevertheless, in each instance, one has an experience *of* the wine; one perceives it. Hence, the naïve realist will say that the experiences phenomenally overlap and therefore *falsely* (according to Mehta) predict that they are phenomenally similar.

But, for familiar reasons, this prediction does not seem to be a false one. Plausibly, the phenomenal characters of auditory experiences include spatial properties. In auditory experience, sounds are typically presented to one as coming from some spatial direction or, possibly, a highly determinable spatial location. If this is right, then visual, tactile, and auditory experiences are all phenomenally similar in virtue of their being spatial experiences.

However, it is less clear whether olfactory and gustatory experiences are spatial. So it might be that the experiences one undergoes when smelling or tasting the wine are in no way phenomenally similar to E1. In light of this, we might try a different iteration of the Argument from Phenomenal Overlap. For the sake of illustration, let us focus on the olfactory case (though what I say applies mutatis mutandis to the gustatory case as well). Suppose that you are smelling the wine and undergoing a veridical olfactory experience. Call this experience E3. Mehta might now appeal to the following version of the Argument:

B1. E1 and E3 are not phenomenally similar.

B2. If naïve realism is true, then E1 and E3 are phenomenally similar.

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undergo B. If you doubt this, consider the fact that what it is like to undergo A is more similar to what it is like to undergo B than it is to what it is like to undergo E1 or E2 from WINE. Hence, there is a phenomenal similarity relation that holds between A and B. However, there need not be some phenomenal element that is common to both A and B in order for them to be phenomenally similar. Plausibly, they could be phenomenally similar merely because their phenomenal characters include qualities that are determinates of the same determinable pain quality.

CB. So naïve realism is false.

It is worth noting that proponent of this iteration of the Argument must take on certain, somewhat strong commitments. As we have seen, if B1 is true and E1 and E3 are not phenomenally similar, then it cannot be the case that E1 and E3 are both spatial experiences. But since E1 is a visual experience, and all visual experiences are spatial experiences, E1 is a spatial experience. That means, if B1 is true, then E3 cannot be a spatial experience. This commits the proponent of this iteration of the Argument to the claim that there is at least one *wholly non-spatial* olfactory experience. In other words, E3 cannot have a phenomenal character that contains any spatial properties: it cannot present to its subject size, shape, or even highly determinable spatial location.

The problem is that this is not supported by the phenomenology of olfactory experience. Imagine that you are smelling the wine and undergoing an experience very much like E3. Your olfactory experience does not seem to tell you about any determinate location of the wine. However, it does seem to tell you that the wine is *here* or *around*. As Clare Batty puts it, "Olfactory experience seems to tell us merely that certain olfactory properties are instantiated at the undifferentiated location of 'here'" (2010a, 167).[9] But if this is right, then E3 is a spatial experience. If it is a spatial experience then, in certain respects, it will be phenomenally similar to E1. So, B1 is false.

This seems to me sufficient reason to reject the second iteration of the Argument from Phenomenal Overlap. But let us set this to one side and suppose for the sake of argument that E3 is a wholly non-spatial experience and that E1 and E3 are in no way phenomenally similar. In order for naïve realism to deliver the result that they are phenomenally similar, it must be true that E1 and E3 are experiences of the same thing. In particular, the desired result is that both E1 and E3 are experiences of the same body of wine. If they are, then the naïve realist will be forced to say that they share a phenomenal element and, therefore, are phenomenally similar.

There are two ways that the naïve realist might try to reply. I will describe them in ascending order of plausibility. First, the naïve realist could claim that it is implausible that the *sources* of smells (i.e. ordinary physical objects) are the objects of olfactory experience. She could, as some do, suggest that the objects of olfactory perception are merely *odors*—the "gaseous emanations given off by objects" (Batty 2010b, 532). However, it is plausible that Mehta could simply construct a different iteration of the Argument

[9] Though there is little literature on this topic, something similar seems true of gustatory experience. It is plausible that tastes, flavours, and the like are presented to one as being at the undifferentiated location of here in gustatory experience.

from Phenomenal Overlap to get around this. He could, perhaps, use an example where one both sees and smells the steam emanating from a mug of hot chocolate.

The second line of reply that the naïve realist could deploy is a sort of 'divide and conquer' strategy. She could hold that naïve realism is true of visual experience, tactile experience, and even auditory experience. But she needn't say that naïve realism is true of all perceptual experiences in all modalities. Instead, she could hold that only *modest* naïve realism is true of, for example, olfactory and gustatory experiences. That is, she could merely hold that, for any veridical olfactory or gustatory experience *e*, the phenomenal character of *e* has external property instances as elements in virtue of the subject of *e* perceiving those property instances. Call any combination of naïve realism and modest naïve realism *sophisticated naïve realism*. Unlike the full-blown naïve realist, the sophisticated naïve realist is not committed to E1 and E3 being phenomenally similar. Why? The modest naïve realist does not claim that particular objects are elements of olfactory experiences' phenomenal characters. Hence, she is not committed to the body of wine B being a phenomenal element of both E1 and E3 and, consequently, is not committed to E1 and E3 phenomenally overlapping with respect to B. As a result, she is not committed to E1 and E3 being phenomenally similar (at least not in virtue of phenomenally overlapping with respect to B).

Adopting sophisticated naïve realism is not ad hoc. In fact, it is plausible that phenomenology encourages us to divide things up in this way. Visual phenomenology suggests that we are directly aware of *particular* objects. When we reflect on the phenomenal character of visual experience, it does seem that we are directly visually aware of some particular external item and its properties. That suggests that naïve realism is true of visual experience. But olfactory phenomenology does not strike us in this way. When I smell something sour and pungent, I do not seem to be directly aware of any *particular* external object. At best, I seem to be aware of *something or other* that is 'here' or 'around'. As Clare Batty puts it, "olfactory experience predicates properties to 'something we know not what' at the undifferentiated location of 'here'" (2010a, 172). Nonetheless, we do seem to be directly aware of instances of various properties in olfactory experience —the sourness or pungency of a smell, for example. Taken together, these considerations seem to suggest that while naïve realism may be true of visual experience, only *modest* naïve realism is true of olfactory experience.[10]

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[10] One might suggest that it is inessential to Mehta's core insight that the pair of experiences not be phenomenally similar to one another in any respect. In some places, he paraphrases his objection by saying that naïve realists "falsely predict that two experiences must be phenomenally similar merely in virtue of sharing particular parts" (emphasis added, 2014, 320). Returning to the original version of the Argument from Phenomenal Overlap, perhaps his objection is supposed to be this: contrary to the commitments of naïve realism, the fact that E1 and E2 phenomenally overlap with respect to B cannot ground the fact that they are phenomenally similar (if they are). Formulating the Argument in this way would allow Mehta to say that E1 and E2 are phenomenally similar. He would merely have to deny that having B as a common phenomenal element grounds

To top this all off, the naïve realist can bolster her response to the Argument by appealing to a plausible explanation of why we might initially be inclined to think that E1 and E2 are in no way phenomenally similar. There is no question that E1 and E2 are phenomenally different in striking ways. What it is like to see a body of wine before you is very different from what it is like to feel it spilled in your lap. The naïve realist could say that we confuse the experiences' being phenomenally very different for their being in no way phenomenally similar.

Now, I do not endorse naïve realism. I would welcome a simple argument against it. However, despite its novelty and simplicity, I can only conclude that naïve realists have little to fear from the Argument from Phenomenal Overlap. Accordingly, those of us opposed to naïve realism must content ourselves with the hard truth: there are no simple arguments against naïve realism.[11]

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(even partially) their phenomenal similarity. But this version of the Argument cannot be right either. Suppose that E1 and E2 both have B as an element of their phenomenal characters. It follows (somewhat trivially) that there is a similarity between E1 and E2: they both have B as an element of their phenomenal characters. Of course, this is a phenomenal similarity, that is to say, a similarity between E1 and E2 that holds in virtue of their phenomenal characters. Hence, that E1 and E2 have B as a common phenomenal element could (at least partially) ground the fact that E1 and E2 are phenomenally similar.

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