

# **Sensory Character and Participatory Disclosure: Beyond Representation and Naive Realism**

Roberto Woodrow Popolla

## **Abstract**

A persistent challenge for direct realism concerns the status of sensory character. If sensory states have a determinate phenomenal character, they appear to require representational content, collapsing direct realism into intentionalism. If non-representational, sensory character risks becoming explanatorily idle. This dilemma, pressed forcefully by naive realists following M.G.F. Martin, appears to leave direct realism without stable ground.

This paper argues that both horns share an unexamined assumption: that sensory character can contribute to perception only representationally or as a brute causal intermediary. Such an assumption reflects a restricted ontology of perception in which explanatory resources are limited to inner mental states and outer physical objects.

Drawing on a participatory realist framework, I propose that sensory character is the determinate phenomenological form of participatory disclosure itself, the lived mode through which a mind-independent being becomes genuinely present to a finite perceiver without being exhausted by that presence. This dissolves the dilemma without retreating to either representational mediation or naive immediacy, while grounding a richer ontological vocabulary for perception theory.

## **Author's Note**

This paper addresses the problem of sensory character as a focused application of a larger metaphysical framework, Participatory Non-Reductionist Realism, which is currently under systematic development. The participatory realist ontology employed here is not fully defended within this paper, but is elaborated elsewhere. The aim is to demonstrate the framework's capacity to resolve a specific and longstanding problem in perception theory while also indicating the broader ontological commitments on which that resolution depends.

## **Keywords**

direct realism; philosophy of perception; sensory character; participatory realism; manifestation; intentionalism; naive realism; disjunctivism; phenomenal character; inexhaustibility

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary philosophy of perception is structured around a persistent and apparently exhaustive opposition. Either perceptual experience involves representational content that mediates our access to the world, or it involves direct contact with mind-independent objects whose properties constitute that experience. Intentionalism occupies the first position; naive realism, in its most developed forms, occupies the second. Each position captures something genuine.

Intentionalism correctly recognizes that perceptual experience has determinate phenomenal character that varies across conditions independently of the objects perceived. Naive realism correctly insists that perception places us in genuine, unmediated contact with mind-independent reality rather than with mental proxies or representational vehicles. Yet each position achieves its insight at a significant cost. Intentionalism purchases phenomenal determinacy by interposing representational content between perceiver and world, undermining the directness that perception phenomenologically presents itself as having. Naive realism preserves directness by making the perceived object constitutive of phenomenal character, struggling to account for the evident fact that experience varies in ways the object alone does not explain.

This opposition generates what has become one of the sharpest challenges to direct realism: the dilemma of sensory character. If sensory states possess determinate phenomenal character capable of contributing to perceptual awareness, that character appears to require intentional or representational structure, thereby collapsing direct realism into a form of intentionalism. If sensory character is understood as purely qualitative and non-representational, it risks becoming explanatorily idle, contributing nothing essential to perception. The dilemma, pressed with particular force by naive realists following M.G.F. Martin, appears to leave direct realism without stable ground. Either sensory character mediates perception representationally, or it does nothing.

I argue that both horns of this dilemma rest upon a shared and unexamined assumption: that sensory character can contribute to perception only by functioning either as representational content or as a brute causal intermediary. This assumption is not an isolated error. It reflects a deeper restriction on the ontological categories available to perception theory, namely a restriction to inner mental states and outer physical objects as the only explanatory resources. Within that binary, representation and causation exhaust the available options. I suggest that the dilemma arises not from sensory character alone but from a restricted ontology of perception.

This paper proposes a way out. Drawing on the framework of Participatory Non-Reductionist Realism, I argue that sensory character is neither an independently representational layer standing between perceiver and world nor an inert qualitative residue. It is the determinate phenomenological form of participatory disclosure itself, namely the specific lived mode through which a mind-independent being becomes genuinely present to a finite perceiver in a particular

encounter. On this account, perception is a real participatory relation between irreducible beings. Every such relation is genuine without being exhaustive: the being encountered is really present, yet never reducible to or exhausted by any single mode of its disclosure. Sensory character is the determinacy of that mode, namely the specific form the encounter takes from the perspective of the perceiver, and it performs genuine explanatory work without requiring representational content.

The resulting position preserves what is correct in direct realism: perception places us in real, unmediated contact with mind-independent beings. It equally preserves what drives the recognition of sensory character in the first place: perceptual encounter is always perspectival, conditioned, and non-exhaustive. Crucially, this non-exhaustion is not an epistemic deficiency to be explained away. It belongs to the structure of being itself. Beings exceed every relation and every mode of disclosure in which they participate. Perception is therefore real contact with reality, always partial, never merely representational.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 examines the dilemma of sensory character in detail, identifying the shared assumption underlying both horns. Section 3 introduces the participatory realist framework and its core ontological commitments. Section 4 develops the account of sensory character as participatory disclosure and shows how it dissolves the dilemma. Section 5 addresses the treatment of illusion and hallucination within the framework. Section 6 distinguishes the resulting position from both intentionalism and naive realism. Section 7 considers objections. Section 8 concludes by indicating the broader implications for perception theory.

## **2. The Dilemma of Sensory Character**

The challenge facing direct realism is not a general one about whether perception gives us access to mind-independent reality. It is more specific: it concerns the status of sensory character within a direct realist account. It arises from a more specific question concerning sensory character itself. If perception places us in direct contact with mind-independent objects, what role remains for the sensory character of experience?

The problem becomes apparent when we consider ordinary cases of perceptual variation. A straight stick partially submerged in water appears bent. A white wall appears orange under sunset light. A distant object appears smaller than the same object viewed from nearby. In each case, the perceived object remains what it is, yet the character of experience varies.

Such variation appears to require explanation. The phenomenal character of experience is not exhausted simply by citing the existence of the object perceived. Something about the encounter itself possesses a determinate sensory character through which the object is presented.

A direct realist cannot simply set this character aside. It is a genuine feature of perceptual experience that any adequate account of perception must explain. It is precisely here that the dilemma emerges. Suppose sensory character performs genuine explanatory work within perception. In that case, it seems to require some form of intentional or representational content. The experience presents the stick as bent, the wall as orange, or the object as small. Sensory character appears to possess a presentational structure directed toward how things are. If so, direct realism risks collapsing into intentionalism. What explains perceptual awareness is no longer direct contact with the object itself but the representational content through which the object is presented.

The alternative appears no more attractive. Suppose sensory character is stripped of representational significance and understood as merely qualitative. It then becomes difficult to explain why sensory character is needed at all. If the object itself does the work of perception and sensory character contributes no presentational content, then sensory character becomes explanatorily idle. It may accompany perception, but it explains nothing essential about perceptual awareness.

The resulting dilemma is stark. Either sensory character contributes to perception by presenting the world as being a certain way, in which case it appears representational, or it contributes nothing essential and becomes philosophically redundant.

This challenge has proven particularly powerful because both options seem independently plausible. Direct realism requires that perception involve genuine contact with mind-independent reality. Yet perceptual experience also exhibits a determinate phenomenological character that varies across circumstances and appears to demand explanation. The difficulty lies in accounting for both simultaneously. The force of the dilemma therefore derives from a deeper assumption that often remains implicit. Both horns assume that the contribution of sensory character must be understood according to one of two available models. It must either function representationally, supplying content through which the world is presented, or function causally as an accompanying state whose role is exhausted by its occurrence. No third possibility is considered.

The remainder of this paper argues that this assumption is mistaken. Sensory character need not be understood as representational content, nor as an inert qualitative accompaniment. The dilemma appears compelling only because the ontological categories governing the debate have been drawn too narrowly. What is needed is not a choice between its horns but a re-examination of the framework that generates them.

### **3. Participatory Realism - The Ontological Framework**

Resolving the dilemma of sensory character requires ontological resources that the standard debate does not supply. Both horns assume that perception must ultimately be explained in terms of either representational content or causal interaction between independently specified entities.

In order to evaluate that assumption, a different ontological starting point is required. The framework employed here begins with beings rather than representations, contents, or structures. By a being, I mean an irreducibly distinct actuality capable of entering into relations of participation and disclosure. A being is not reducible to its parts, its properties, its relations, or any particular manifestation through which it becomes present. Nor is it constituted by acts of cognition or conceptual determination. To be a being is to possess actuality in one's own right, an actuality that no relation, description, or manifestation can fully contain.

This irreducibility should not be confused with isolation. A being does not stand outside all relation. On the contrary, beings are capable of entering into genuine encounters with one another. Yet no relation constitutes the being that enters into it. Relations presuppose relata. They occur between beings that are already actual rather than generating those beings through the relation itself.

Relations are therefore real participatory encounters. They are neither projections of thought nor merely external linkages imposed upon otherwise disconnected entities. In participation, beings genuinely affect and are affected by one another. Something real occurs in encounter. Yet participation does not abolish distinction. The beings involved remain irreducibly themselves throughout the relation. Relation is real without being constitutive; participation is genuine without collapse.

Participation, as used here, is not a metaphor drawn from social or biological domains. It is a technical ontological term denoting a real relation in which distinct beings are mutually present without fusion or reduction. Participation differs from causation in that its primary category is presence rather than force or information transfer. It differs from representation in that it involves no semantic or intentional structure. It differs from identity in that the relata remain irreducibly distinct throughout the relation. A participatory relation obtains when a mind-independent being becomes genuinely present to another being through a determinate mode of manifestation, not as an effect in a causal chain, not as a content in a representational state, but as a real presence within a shared relational field.

This understanding of relation allows for a corresponding account of manifestation. Manifestation is the real mode through which a being becomes present within a determinate encounter. It is neither a representation standing between beings nor a veil concealing what is actually there. Manifestation is the genuine presence of the being itself under a particular mode of disclosure. To perceive a tree, for example, is not to encounter an internal representation or any substitute for the tree. It is to encounter the tree itself. Yet this encounter is always determinate, conditioned by the relation in which the tree becomes present. What must be explained is the specific character of that conditioning, the determinate form the encounter assumes from the perceiver's side. The manifestation is thus genuinely of the object while never exhausting the reality of what appears.

This point is crucial. The excess of a being over its manifestations should not be understood as the existence of a hidden interior concealed behind appearance. The claim is not that manifestation reveals only a surface while the real being withdraws into an inaccessible domain. Rather, the being is genuinely present in manifestation, yet no manifestation exhausts the actuality of what is present.

The non-exhaustion of beings by their manifestations is therefore ontological rather than epistemic. It does not arise because perceivers possess limited cognitive capacities or because information is somehow missing from experience. Nor does it arise because reality is hidden behind a veil that prevents complete access. It follows instead from the structure of being itself. A manifestation is always the manifestation of a being, but the actuality of a being is never identical to any single manifestation through which it becomes present.

This distinction between being and manifestation is fundamental for understanding perception. If manifestation exhausted the being that manifests itself, then every encounter would constitute complete possession of what is encountered. No further disclosure would be possible because nothing would remain beyond the manifestation already given. Yet ordinary experience suggests otherwise. We repeatedly encounter the same being through different modes of disclosure without concluding that any one encounter exhausts what the being is. Participatory realism therefore rejects both representational mediation and naive immediacy. Against representationalism, it maintains that what is encountered in perception is genuinely the being itself rather than an intermediary content. Against naive immediacy, it maintains that no manifestation ever exhausts the actuality of what is encountered. Perception is real contact with a mind-independent being, but always through a determinate mode of participatory disclosure.

This account builds on Smith's distinction between merely sensory and properly perceptual experience, and it shares his concern to explain how perceptual consciousness differs from bare sensation. But participatory realism goes beyond Smith by refusing to treat sensory character as something that needs to be integrated into a representationalist or quasi-representational account of perceptual consciousness. Instead, it takes sensory character to be the phenomenological form of a real participatory relation to mind-independent being, which gives the sensory/perceptual distinction a more explicitly ontological grounding than Smith himself provides.

These ontological resources make it possible to reconsider the dilemma of sensory character. Once manifestation is understood as the real mode of presence of a being within a participatory relation, sensory character need no longer be conceived either as representational content or as an explanatorily idle accompaniment. A third possibility becomes available.

#### **4. Sensory Character as Participatory Disclosure**

Participatory realism makes available a third possibility. Sensory character is neither representational content nor an inert qualitative accompaniment. It is the determinate

phenomenological form of participatory disclosure itself. To see why, consider what occurs in perceptual encounter. Perception is not a relation between a subject and an internal representation, nor merely the causal impact of an external object upon a sensory system. It is a real participatory relation between irreducibly distinct beings, in which a mind-independent being becomes genuinely present to a perceiver through a determinate mode of manifestation.

Such manifestation is not exhausted by identifying the being that appears. Every manifestation has a particular character. The same tree may appear differently at dawn, at noon, or in evening light. A melody may be encountered differently depending on distance, acoustics, or attention. A face may be disclosed differently in grief, joy, familiarity, or estrangement. In each case, the being remains genuinely present, yet the mode of disclosure varies. What requires explanation is this determinacy. Why does an encounter have this character rather than another? Why is the tree disclosed in this way, the melody in this manner, the face under this aspect?

The traditional dilemma assumes only two answers: either determinacy is supplied by representational content, or it is explanatorily irrelevant. Participatory realism rejects both.

Consider first the representationalist horn. On this view, sensory character contributes because it presents the world as being a certain way. Experience has intentional content through which the world is represented, and the sensory dimension derives its explanatory role from this structure. The difficulty is that this places world-directedness in the wrong location. It treats perceptual awareness as directed toward reality by a content-bearing state that stands between perceiver and world. The representational layer performs the work of presentation, while the world becomes what is represented.

Participatory realism reverses this order. World-directedness belongs to the participatory relation itself. Perception is already a relation to a mind-independent being. The encounter is directed toward reality because reality is genuinely present within it. No additional representational content is required. Sensory character therefore does not function by representing the world. It does not mediate between perceiver and being. Rather, it is the lived determinacy of the encounter itself. The tree is not first represented and then encountered. It is encountered directly. Sensory character is the form that encounter takes.

The first horn is thereby avoided. Sensory character contributes to perception without becoming representational. The second horn appears equally pressing. If sensory character is not representational, does it not become a merely qualitative accompaniment, a phenomenological decoration added to a relation whose real work is already complete? No. Sensory character is essential because it accounts for the determinacy of disclosure.

A participatory encounter is never abstract. It occurs under specific conditions, through particular capacities, and from a definite perspective. A being is never present in an undifferentiated way,

but always in a specific manner. Sensory character names this specificity. Its role is not to add content but to explain why the encounter has the character it does. Without it, one can still say that a being is present, but not how it is present. Distinct encounters collapse into an indeterminate notion of presence, and the difference between perceiving this tree in this way and another in a different way disappears from the account. Sensory character is therefore not an idle wheel. It identifies a real feature of perceptual participation: the determinate lived form of manifestation. Manifestation has two inseparable but non-identical dimensions: the genuine presence of the being itself, which is not a representation, substitute, or proxy but is really present within the relation of disclosure, and the determinate mode through which that presence is encountered, such that the same being can become present through multiple modes without ceasing to be the same being, with each disclosure possessing a particular phenomenological form corresponding to the conditions of the encounter. Sensory character is this second dimension.

The being's presence and the sensory character of its disclosure are not separate entities requiring coordination, nor are they identical. They are distinct aspects of a single participatory event. The being contributes the reality that becomes present; sensory character contributes the form that presence takes within the encounter. This explains why sensory character is both indispensable and non-representational. It is indispensable because manifestation is always determinate; a being is never disclosed in no particular way. It is non-representational because the being is already genuinely present. Sensory character neither mediates access to the being nor alters its reality; it specifies the manner in which that reality is present. The dilemma of sensory character therefore rests on a false opposition. Sensory character need not represent in order to contribute, nor become idle once representation is denied. Its role lies in the structure of disclosure itself. It is the determinate phenomenological form through which a mind-independent being becomes present to a finite perceiver within a real but non-exhaustive encounter.

## **5. Illusion and Hallucination**

The account developed in the preceding section faces an immediate test. If sensory character belongs to the structure of participatory disclosure, what becomes of cases where disclosure goes wrong or fails entirely? These cases are often taken to motivate the very dilemma participatory realism rejects. If sensory character can occur in the absence of the relevant object, it appears detachable from world-involving relations and therefore best understood in representational terms. Conversely, if perception is always world-involving, it becomes difficult to explain how error is possible. Participatory realism addresses both cases by distinguishing between modified participation and its absence.

Consider first illusion. In cases of illusion, a perceiver stands in a genuine participatory relation to a mind-independent being, yet the sensory character of the encounter diverges from what might be taken to reflect the being's stable or typical properties. A straight stick appears bent in

water; a distant object appears smaller; a surface appears differently colored under unusual lighting. In such cases, the object is not replaced by a representation, nor is it absent. The being is genuinely present within the participatory relation.

What varies is the mode of disclosure. The sensory character of the encounter reflects real conditions under which the being becomes manifest, including features of the medium, the perceiver's position, and other contextual factors. These conditions shape how the being is given without severing the relation to it. The resulting disclosure is therefore partial and conditioned rather than false in the sense of misrepresenting an absent or substituted object.

Illusion does not require that sensory character represent the world incorrectly. It requires only that manifestation be capable of variation across conditions. The divergence at issue is not between a representation and its object, but between different possible modes of disclosure of the same being. Illusion is thus a genuine perceptual encounter whose determinacy reflects atypical but real conditions of participation.

Hallucination differs more radically. In hallucination, there is no participatory relation to the relevant mind-independent being. The sensory character that would ordinarily arise within such a relation is instead produced in its absence. The causal story of how such activation occurs, through neural processes, imagination, or pathological states, falls outside the scope of this account. What matters is the ontological distinction, the presence or absence of the participatory relation that constitutes genuine disclosure. Something is genuinely occurring at the level of experience, but it is not the disclosure of a being within a participatory encounter.

This distinction preserves a fundamental asymmetry. Veridical perception and illusion are alike in that both involve real participation in which a being becomes present, even if under differing conditions of disclosure. Hallucination, by contrast, is not a variant of such participation but its absence. It is therefore not the same kind of event as perception with different accuracy conditions, but a categorically distinct kind of occurrence.

Because of this, the presence of sensory character in hallucination does not show that sensory character is independent of participatory relations in the way representationalism requires. It shows only that similar phenomenological forms can be produced outside the relations in which they normally function. The existence of such cases does not undermine the claim that, in perception, sensory character belongs to the structure of participatory disclosure. The contrast can be stated directly. In perception and illusion, sensory character is the determinate form of a real relation in which a being becomes present. In hallucination, sensory character is a real experiential event that lacks this relational grounding. The former are world-involving disclosures; the latter are not disclosures at all.

Participatory realism can therefore accommodate both illusion and hallucination without difficulty. Illusion reflects the variability of manifestation within genuine participation.

Hallucination reflects the possibility of sensory activation in the absence of such participation. Neither case requires that sensory character be understood as representational content, and neither threatens the claim that perception is fundamentally a relation to mind-independent reality.

## **6. Distinguishing The Position**

Participatory realism occupies a distinct position in contemporary perception theory, irreducible to either of its dominant alternatives: intentionalism and naive realism. Though it shares features with both, it cannot be reduced to either. The view occupies a space that standard taxonomies do not recognize, yet that space is precisely where a stable direct realism can live.

### ***6.1 Against Intentionalism***

Intentionalism (or representationalism) holds that the phenomenal character of an experience is fixed by its representational content. On this view, sensory character contributes to perception because it presents the world as being a certain way. What makes an experience perceptual is its possession of intentional content with accuracy conditions.

Participatory realism rejects this account of sensory character. Sensory character is not a representational state. It does not carry accuracy conditions, nor does it function by presenting the world as being a certain way. It is the determinate phenomenological form of a participatory relation in which a mind-independent being becomes genuinely present.

The difference is not merely terminological. Intentionalism treats world-directedness as a feature of intentional states: the subject is related to the world via content that represents it. Participatory realism treats world-directedness as a feature of the relation itself. Perception is already a relation to a mind-independent being. The directedness is not conferred by content but is built into the ontological structure of the encounter. This distinction has consequences. On intentionalism, the primary question is whether the content is accurate. On participatory realism, the primary question is whether the participatory relation obtains and in what mode the being is disclosed. The former makes perception a matter of representation with truth or accuracy conditions. The latter makes perception a matter of real participation in which a being appears under determinate conditions.

Sensory character, on this view, does not sit between perceiver and world as content. It belongs to the disclosure relation itself. It is not a representation of the encounter but an aspect of the encounter's actuality. This is incompatible with the claim that phenomenal character is fixed by representational content.

## 6.2 *Against Naive Realism*

Naive realism holds that in veridical perception, the perceived object and its properties are constitutive of the phenomenal character of the experience. The phenomenology is understood as partly composed of the external object itself. This preserves directness but at a cost: it struggles to account for non-veridical cases without either collapsing the distinction between perception and hallucination or treating hallucination as a mere numerical difference rather than a kind difference.

Participatory realism preserves directness without making the object constitutive of phenomenal character. Martin's central claim in the transparency literature is that, in veridical perception, the phenomenal character of experience is determined by the object and its properties as they are before the mind, and that this supports a broadly naive realist picture of perceptual consciousness. Participatory realism diverges at precisely this point: the object is genuinely present, but phenomenal character is not constitutively exhausted by the object and its properties alone. Rather, sensory character belongs to the mode of disclosure through which that object becomes present within the encounter, so the ontological structure of the experience is not identical to Martin's constitutive claim. The being is genuinely present within the participatory relation, yet the sensory character of the encounter is not identical with the object or its properties. It is the mode through which the being becomes present, and this mode belongs to the encounter as a whole, not solely to the object.

The same being can become present through multiple modes of manifestation depending on conditions of the encounter. The object does not fully determine the sensory character; the relational context does as well. This is not a concession but a consequence of the framework's ontological commitments. Perception is not exhaustive of the being, and this non-exhaustion is built in at the ontological level.

Michael Martin's version of naive realism, for example, ties phenomenal character closely to the actual object and its properties in veridical perception. That structure cannot easily accommodate the idea that the same being can be genuinely present yet disclosed in radically different modes without altering the ontological status of the experience. Participatory realism, by contrast, makes the mode of presence a fundamental dimension of disclosure. The object is real and present, but the encounter is not exhausted by it.

Brewer's *Perception and Its Objects* develops a strong version of naive realism on which perceptual experience is a direct relation to mind-independent objects, and those objects help constitute the character of veridical perception. Participatory realism agrees that perception is direct, but it denies that directness requires the object to be constitutive of phenomenal character in Brewer's sense. The same pressure that arises for Martin's object-constitutive view also arises here: participatory realism preserves object-presence while locating the determinacy of sensory

character in the participatory encounter rather than in the object alone. This allows participatory realism to preserve directness while avoiding the constitutive claim that generates difficulties for naive realism. The object is not a component of phenomenal character; it is the reality that becomes present within a relation whose form is jointly determined by the being, the perceiver, and the conditions of disclosure.

### ***6.3 The Precise Logical Location***

Standard taxonomies of perception theory tend to present direct realism and representationalism as the main alternatives, with naive realism as a prominent form of direct realism. Within this framework, a view that is both direct and non-constitutive of phenomenal character appears to have no place. It must either be folded into naive realism or pushed toward representationalism.

Participatory realism occupies a space that this taxonomy does not recognize: a direct realism that denies that the object is constitutive of phenomenal character, yet also denies that perception is fundamentally representational. World-directedness is relational and ontological, not intentional and semantic. The object is genuinely present, but the encounter is not exhausted by it, and the sensory character belongs to the mode of disclosure rather than to the object alone.

This position is not a hybrid or compromise. It is a distinct metaphysical option that becomes available once perception is understood as participatory disclosure rather than as representation or simple object-involving relation. The failure of existing taxonomies to recognize this space is not a failure of the view but a limitation of the conceptual landscape. The unrecognized space that participatory realism occupies is exactly where a stable direct realism must live. It avoids the representationalist move that inserts content between perceiver and world. It also avoids the naive realist move that makes the object constitutive of phenomenal character and thus struggles with non-veridical cases. The result is a direct realism that can accommodate illusion and hallucination without collapsing their asymmetry or reintroducing intermediaries, a position whose coherence remains to be tested against the strongest objections it faces.

## **7. Objections**

Four objections are most likely to be pressed against the participatory realist account of sensory character. The first three target the metaphysical structure of the view. The fourth targets its core identity. Each can be answered without abandoning the framework.

### ***7.1 The Causal Objection***

One might ask whether participatory disclosure is simply a sophisticated causal theory of perception under new terminology. On a standard causal view, perception occurs when an

external object causes a suitable internal state in the perceiver. The object is real and external, but what the perceiver is directly aware of is the caused state.

Participatory realism is not merely a reformulation of this view. The difference is not terminological but metaphysical. In a causal account, the relation between object and perceiver is fundamentally causal. The perceiver is affected by the object, and awareness is mediated by internally located states. In participatory realism, the primary relation is not causal but ontological. Perception is a real relation between irreducibly distinct beings in which a mind-independent being becomes genuinely present to a perceiver. Causation may be involved, but it does not define the relation. What matters is not the causal chain but the metaphysical fact that a being is present within the encounter.

This distinction is crucial. On a causal view, the question is whether the internal state is appropriately caused. On participatory realism, the question is whether the participatory relation obtains and in what mode the being is disclosed. The former keeps the perceiver and world connected via causation and internal states. The latter keeps them connected via a real relation of disclosure in which the being itself is present.

The causal objection therefore fails to capture the metaphysical structure of the view. Participatory realism is not causation with new terminology. It is a different account of what perception fundamentally is, not a relation mediated by causally produced states, but a relation in which a being becomes genuinely present.

## ***7.2 The Kantian Objection***

A second objection is that if beings exceed every encounter, participatory realism collapses into Kantian noumenalism. If no encounter exhausts the reality of what appears, then the being as it is in itself remains unknowable, and we are left with things-in-themselves beyond our access.

This objection misunderstands the role of non-exhaustion. Participatory realism does not claim that beings are partially hidden behind appearances. It claims that beings are genuinely present within the relation of disclosure, yet never fully exhausted by that presence. The being is not split into an accessible appearance and an inaccessible noumenon. There is only the being, manifesting under determinate conditions without being reducible to those conditions. The non-exhaustion is not epistemic limitation but ontological depth. It is genuinely known in every real encounter, while no encounter constitutes complete possession of what is known.

It is genuinely present while remaining greater than any single mode of its presence. This is not Kantian agnosticism about things-in-themselves. It is a realist claim about the excess of being over disclosure. The Kantian objection therefore mischaracterizes the view. Participatory realism does not posit unknowable noumena behind appearances. It affirms that beings are knowable

precisely because they are genuinely present, while also affirming that no single encounter exhausts their reality.

### ***7.3 The Hallucination Objection***

A third objection is that if hallucination involves real sensory character without a participatory relation, the view reintroduces a subjective layer that does the same work as sense-data. If sensory character can occur in the absence of the relevant object, it appears to be a mental entity that mediates between perceiver and world. This objection assumes that any real sensory character must be a mediating entity.

Participatory realism rejects this assumption. Sensory character is not a mental object or proxy. It is the determinate form of disclosure when a participatory relation obtains. In hallucination, a similar phenomenological form is produced in the absence of that relation. The key distinction is that in hallucination, the sensory character is not the disclosure of a being. It is a real experiential event that lacks the relational grounding that defines perception. It is not a sense-datum that stands between perceiver and world. It is a state that mimics the form of disclosure without instantiation of the relation.

The asymmetry between perception and hallucination is preserved. In perception, sensory character belongs to a real participatory relation. In hallucination, it is activated without that relation. The former is world-involving; the latter is not. This is categorically different from a view that treats both as instances of the same kind of event with different accuracy conditions. The hallucination objection therefore fails to distinguish between a mediating entity and a relational form that can occur aberrantly. Participatory realism does not reintroduce sense-data. It distinguishes between disclosure and its phenomenological form when disclosure is absent.

### ***7.4 The Relabeling Objection***

The deepest objection is that participatory disclosure is simply representational content under a new name. On this view, the participatory realist has changed the vocabulary without changing the account. The being that “becomes present” is just the object represented. The mode of disclosure is just the representational content. The participatory relation is just the relation of representation. This objection misses the metaphysical shift at the center of the view. Representationalism treats perception as a relation to content that represents the world. The world is not directly present; it is represented by the content. Accuracy consists in the correspondence between content and world.

Participatory realism treats perception as a relation in which the world is genuinely present. The being is not represented; it is manifest. The relation is not semantic but ontological. Accuracy is not the primary category; participation is. The difference is not terminological because it changes

the structure of the account. Representationalism must explain how content relates to the world. Participatory realism must explain how beings participate in disclosure. The former makes representation prior and the world derivative. The latter makes the world prior and representation, if it occurs, derivative. Sensory character plays a different role in each. On representationalism, sensory character is fixed by representational content. On participatory realism, sensory character is the form of the participatory relation itself, not a content that stands between perceiver and world. The latter does not require accuracy conditions because the being is already present.

The relabeling objection assumes that all accounts of perception must ultimately be accounts of representation. Participatory realism denies this assumption. It is not representationalism with new vocabulary. To further clarify, participatory disclosure should not be identified with relational intentionality. On a relational intentionalist view, the subject-world relation remains intentional in kind, so it still carries semantic properties and accuracy or correctness conditions, even if those are located in the relation rather than in an inner state. Participatory realism rejects that framing. Its relation is ontological rather than intentional: world-directedness consists in the genuine presence of a mind-independent being within disclosure, not in an intentional relation with correctness conditions. The difference is therefore not merely where intentionality is housed, but whether intentionality is the right category at all. The relabeling objection, in the end, can only appear compelling to one who has already assumed that representation exhausts the available ontological options. Participatory realism denies that assumption, and that denial is not arbitrary but follows from a different and more adequate account of what beings are and how they encounter one another.

## **8. Conclusion**

Sensory character is the determinate phenomenological form of participatory disclosure itself. By deploying a participatory non-reductionist realist ontology, the account avoids the dilemma that forces sensory character into either representational content or eliminable accompaniment. Sensory character contributes genuinely to perception without representing the world. It is the lived structure through which a mind-independent being becomes present to a finite perceiver within a real but non-exhaustive encounter.

The broader implication for perception theory is that its ontological vocabulary is too narrow. Current frameworks treat perception primarily in terms of representation, causation, or simple object-involving relation. These categories cannot accommodate a view that is both direct and non-constitutive of phenomenal character. Participatory realism shows that perception theory must expand beyond this restricted ontology to recognize participatory disclosure as a fundamental mode of being-present. Without this expansion, direct realism remains unstable, caught between representationalism and naive realism.

The framework developed here points toward further work. The participatory ontology underlying this account requires systematic development beyond its application to perception. Other domains, including memory, imagination, and intersubjectivity, may also be understood as modes of participatory disclosure rather than as representational or causal relations. This paper has shown that sensory character can be stabilized within such a framework. Whether the framework can sustain broader application remains for future work. What is clear is that once perception is understood as participatory disclosure, problems that appeared intractable dissolve, and a more adequate account of what it means to encounter a mind-independent world becomes possible.