

On Susanna Schellenberg's *The Unity of Perception*

Ayoob Shahmoradi

✉ ayoob@ucsd.edu

Draft, June 20, 2020

1 Introduction

In the first half of *The Unity of Perception*, Chapters 1-6, Susanna Schellenberg presents her account of the nature of perceptual experience while in the second half she develops an epistemology that draws upon her views in the philosophy of perception discussed in the first half. In this short piece, I will be very selective. I will focus on the first two parts of the book, i.e., Chapters 1-5. The edifice of Schellenberg's theory is built entirely upon five arguments presented in these two parts—these are the Particularity Argument (pp.24-5), the Singular Content Argument (p.66), the Perceptual Content Argument (p.115), the Relational Content Argument (pp.117-8), and finally the Argument for Mental Activism (p.150).¹ Therefore, the success or failure of these arguments will be crucial for the fate of the edifice.

One way to look at Schellenberg's theory of perception is to see her as fighting at three different fronts; she begins by arguing that perception is constituted by particulars attempting to rule out the views according to which perception is constituted

¹All references to Schellenberg's work are to [Schellenberg \(2018\)](#).

only by general items. In this front, her main target is the generalist forms of representationalism according to which perception is constitutively a matter of representing a certain content which, in turn, is constituted only by general items like properties and relations—in the rest of this paper by ‘properties’ I mean properties and relations.²

Having ruled out the generalist view, in the next stage, she argues that perception has to have content. By doing that, she attempts to get rid of naive realism according to which perceptual experience is constituted by the perceived objects and properties rather than representational contents. So, according to her, perception has to be constitutively a matter of representing things, and it has to be constituted by particulars. Finally, she goes on to argue that perceptual content has to be characterized in terms of certain Fregean modes of presentation. At this stage, Schellenberg’s target is the Russellian who so far has been fighting alongside her against naive realists and generalists. Schellenberg claims that her view is superior to Russellianism for multiple reasons.

It seems to me that some of Schellenberg’s arguments are not successful. All the five mentioned arguments rely on a shared premise whose plausibility, in the absence of an appropriate theory of particulars, is hard to assess (§2.1). Apart from that, these arguments rely on an underspecified notion of ‘constitution’; there seems to be no sense of the term that could make all the premises of her major arguments true without trivializing their conclusions (§2.2). It also seems to me that the same challenges that Schellenberg raises for her Russellian opponents, or similar problems, arise for her own view (§3). Finally, Schellenberg believes that an advantage of her view is that it entails the possibility of seeing an object without seeing it as being a certain way. In §4, I argue that she fails to justify this position.

2 The Particularity Argument

Schellenberg’s starting point is what she calls the ‘Particularity Thesis’ (PT).

²If Schellenberg’s arguments are successful, they will of course rule out non-representationalist formulations of generalism as well.

A subject's perceptual state M brought about by being perceptually related to the particular α is constituted by α . (p.14)

This might look innocent and uncontroversial. However, for it to be substantial and interesting, it should be understood as the denial of the view that perceptual experience is entirely constituted by general items. One such view holds that perceptual contents are existential propositions; when I perceive a red and round apple, on this view, I perceptually represent the proposition $\lceil \exists x(\text{Red}_{(x)} \ \& \ \text{Round}_{(x)}) \rceil$. The proponent of the PT, however, believes that particulars, including the perceived object itself, (partially) constitute one's perceptual content.

Schellenberg believes that the arguments that so far have been offered in support of the PT all suffer from multiple defects. So, she presents a novel argument for the PT. She also believes that her argument is more fundamental in that it explains the epistemological, phenomenological, etc., roles of perception that all the other arguments for particularity rely on (p.22). Here is how she argues for the PT.

The Particularity Argument

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

Schellenberg's opponent, let's call her 'Gen', believes that perception is not 'constituted' by particulars. Let's consider some of the premises of the argument and examine different ways that Gen might block the derivation of IV.

2.1 Premise (I)

(I) If a subject S perceives particular α , then S discriminates and singles out α (as a consequence of being perceptually related to α).

Premise (I) is particularly important since it is the first premise in four other central arguments of the book as well—i.e., the Singular Content Argument (p.66), the Perceptual Content Argument (p.115), the Relational Content Argument (pp.117-8), and the Argument for Mental Activism (p.150). So, the success or failure of all the five will crucially depend on this premise.

Schellenberg's defense of Premise (I) is that it is not clear how one could perceive, e.g., a cup without discriminating it from its surround (p.25). A *prima facie* challenge for this premise is that, as a matter of fact, one could have a visual perception of an unstructured and uniformly colored wall that fills out one's entire visual field. It seems that in such a case one could perceive the wall and its color without 'discriminating and singling out' any particular, contrary to Premise (I). Schellenberg agrees that one could see such a wall. However, she also believes that, in this case,

the subject [...] is discriminating the part of the uniformly colored wall to her right from the part of the wall to her left. (p.27)

Schellenberg's response does not seem persuasive to me. Even if one divided one's visual field into different parts, as Schellenberg does, that would not automatically result in one's visual field being constituted by *different* particulars. In this case, different parts of one's visual field do not seem to constitute different particulars *just in virtue of being to one's left or right*. A theory according to which the identity of the particulars that constitute the wall is a function of where the subject is standing or of the number of subjects visually perceiving the wall does not seem to be particularly attractive or independently motivated. Thus, for this to be a non-arbitrary verdict Schellenberg needs to tell us how she individuates particulars such that the left and right parts of the uniformly colored wall turn out to be distinct particulars without trivializing the issue in question. There must be a principled reason for why the wall

is constituted by different particulars and why the left and right parts of the wall, rather than its center vs. surround, or any other arbitrary compartments of the wall constitute different particulars.

Apart from this, it seems to me that Premise (I) is not sufficiently motivated. By 'discrimination' one might refer to the sort of discrimination that neuroscientists and perceptual psychologists are interested in. I will use 'discrimination_s' to refer to this sort of discrimination. The typical cases of this are discrimination between edges, areas with different luminance properties, and other kinds of changes that the neurons in the (early) visual system are sensitive to. These are the cases that Schellenberg relies on to motivate her view that perception requires discrimination (pp.25&31). This kind of discrimination, at least *prima facie*, seems to be sub-personal. It is empirically plausible that some neurons, e.g., ganglion cells, respond differentially to various stimuli in their receptive fields and thus discriminates_s lines, edges, etc.³ However, it is not clear that discrimination_s, non-metaphorically, could be attributed to the subject. When my visual system differentially responds to the changes in illumination, that by itself is not sufficient for saying that I discriminate_s an edge. My heart pumps blood without me doing the pumping. Similarly, my visual system does these (and other) computations which are hardly attributable to me as the subject. Moreover, if this were the kind of discrimination that Schellenberg is referring to, then in the uniformly colored wall case there would be no reason to believe that even the visual system does discrimination_s let alone the perceiving subject. The wall is supposed to be uniform in terms of its visually salient properties—e.g., color and luminance. At any rate, Schellenberg is explicit in that her favorite kind of discrimination is not sub-personal (p.31).

There is another sort of discrimination which is a cognitive, personal-level, activity and thus attributable to the subject—I will use 'discrimination_k' to refer to this sort of discrimination. To discriminate_k *b* from *a* at time *t* is to activate (at *t*) the knowledge that *b* is distinct from *a*.⁴ Discrimination_k is a personal level cognitive activity which entails

³For instance, see Palmer (1999, Ch.2).

⁴Williamson (1990).

knowledge and its requirements. Yet, Schellenberg's favorite sort of discrimination is far more primitive than the capacity for knowledge; according to her, the intended sort of discrimination "need not be cognitive (and typically is not)" (p.38) and we share this capacity with "non-rational animals and kids as young as four months old" while these subjects are unable even to refer to objects (p.34). Finally, she seems to be thinking that perception is non-conceptual while knowledge seems to require concepts (p.53).

A subject who is unable to refer to a and b and lacks concepts a fortiori will be unable to activate the knowledge that a is distinct from b . But, if such a subject, as Schellenberg contends, could perceive objects in the same sense that we do⁵, then it is possible to perceive an object without discriminating_k it.

There are two more relevant kinds of discrimination that I would like to discuss here. One of these could be defined in terms of the phenomenology of attention.

Discrimination_a

S discriminates_a b from a at $t \equiv$ [what it is like for S to attend to b at $t \neq$ what it is like for S to attend to a at t].

Discrimination_a does not seem to be the right kind of discrimination that could salvage Premise (I) for multiple reasons. First, it is not clear that seeing the wall at t requires that one attend to two different parts of the wall at the same time—if visually attending to two different parts of the wall at t is possible in the first place. As a matter of fact, it is not clear that seeing requires attention either.⁶ Second, it is not clear that there is a phenomenal difference between attending to the different parts of a uniform wall.

Finally, we have the following notion of discrimination.

Discrimination_φ

S discriminates_φ b from a at $t \equiv$ [what it is like for S to see b at $t \neq$ what it is like for S to see a at t].

⁵"...perception is a low-level mental faculty that we share with animals" (p53).

⁶See: Block (2013). Note that Schellenberg does not seem to believe that seeing entails attending either.

First, given the existence of phenomenal sorites, I tend to believe that Premise (I) under this disambiguation is false; it is possible to arrange a series of n ($n \geq 3$) color chips where what it is like to see chip $_n$, ϕ_n , is different from what it is like to see chip $_1$, ϕ_1 , and that by itself puts the subject in a position to tell that $\phi_n \neq \phi_1$ but for any two adjacent chips, the subject is not able to tell whether what it is like to see one is different from the other.⁷ But then there must be two adjacent chips m and $m + 1$ such that $\phi_m \neq \phi_{m+1}$ but S is not able to tell whether $\phi_m \neq \phi_{m+1}$. If so, then the right hand side of Discrimination $_{\phi}$ is not sufficient for the left hand side.⁸

But let's focus on the left-to-right direction of Discrimination $_{\phi}$. If unconscious perception is possible, Premise (I) under the current disambiguation will again be false. Moreover, it is not clear to me that the subject in the uniform wall case discriminates $_{\phi}$ some particular. This case should not be confused with cases in which, for instance, once a red dot appears to the left of one's visual field and then the same dot appears in the right side of one's visual field. In that case there seems to be a phenomenal difference between the two experiences. However, when one is looking at a uniformly colored and illuminated wall, it is not clear that there is such a phenomenal difference between seeing any two distinct points on the wall. At any rate, plugging this notion of discrimination into Premise (I) requires one to specify what the values of 'a' and 'b'—the discriminated particulars—are supposed to be. Otherwise it would be hard to assess the truth of Premise (I).

2.2 Premise (II)

II. If S discriminates and singles out α (as a consequence of being perceptually related to α), then S's perceptual state M brought about by being

⁷The expression "to put S in a position to tell..." might suggest that Discrimination $_{\phi}$ requires high-level cognitive capacities. There may be a way to cash out this locution, e.g., in behavioral terms, which need no such capacities. Otherwise, Discrimination $_{\phi}$ —and Discrimination $_q$, for that matter—would collapse to Discrimination $_k$.

⁸One could reject the transitivity of identity or hold that the changes in what it is likeness are always detectable by the subject. But none of these options are particularly attractive for familiar reasons. Also note that the remarks in this paragraph apply to Discrimination $_q$ as well.

perceptually related to α is constituted by discriminating and singling out α .

Schellenberg defends Premise (II) by relying on the following principle:

(C) If S is in a mental state in virtue of engaging in a mental activity, then that mental state is constituted at least in part by that mental activity. (p.25)

In order to assess this claim it is helpful to make it clear what 'partial constitution' amounts to. According to a strong reading, B is (partially) constituted by A iff B is metaphysically (partially) individuated in terms of A. On a weak reading, however, B is (partially) constituted by A just in case A is a (partial) cause of B. Then here are two corresponding versions of (C):

(CI) If S is in a mental state in virtue of engaging in a mental activity, then that mental state is partially metaphysically **individuated** by that mental activity.

(CC) If S is in a mental state in virtue of engaging in a mental activity, then that mental state is partially **caused** by that mental activity.

These two theses make (very) different claims. I am going to assess them in the rest of this section.

Consider the following scenario.

Scenario 1

I am wondering if Amir is taller than me. I imagine Amir standing next to me to find out who is taller. Then I go on to form the belief that Amir is taller than me.

One might think that there is a sense according to which I could be in a mental state—e.g., the state of believing that Amir is taller than me—in virtue of engaging in a mental activity—i.e., imaging him standing next to me. Even if I form my belief in virtue of imagining Amir standing next to me, my belief that Amir is taller than me is not metaphysically type-individuated, not even partially, in terms of my imagining

activity. I could have formed that belief by engaging in several other mental activities. If the belief that Amir is taller than me is metaphysically type-individuated in terms of these mental activities, then different instance of this belief could not be metaphysically type-identical. The nature of my belief nonetheless seems to be independent from the activity of imagining Amir standing next to me; the explanatory power that any instance of this belief-type has does not seem to depend on whether I formed it by imagining such and such or by reading his height in diary and comparing it to my height. So, CI seems to be false.

But there is a stronger reading of CI available which is plausible. One might read CI as:

(CI*) If S is in a mental state **metaphysically in virtue of** engaging in a mental activity, then that mental state is partially **individuated** by that mental activity.

CI*, with a strong reading of the 'in virtue of' relation in mind, *might* be plausible. However, as I argued in §2.1, it is not clear that S perceives α metaphysically in virtue of discriminating and singling out α .

Nevertheless it seems that, in Scenario 1, my token belief is partially caused by my activity of imagining such and such. If we rewrite the Particularity Argument in terms of 'partial causation', its conclusion will be the following:

If S perceives α , then S's perceptual state M brought about by being perceptually related to α is partially caused by α .

This could be a plausible claim. However, it is by no means sufficient to support what Schellenberg has been trying to argue for. Gen can happily agree that if S perceives an apple, her perception of the apple is caused by that particular apple. But that does not compel Gen to accept that her perceptual state is metaphysically partially constituted by the perceived apple or that her perception is constituted by the perceived particular in any sense of 'constitution' that forces her to go beyond her generalist account of perception. This, of course, is not to say that perceptual

experience is not metaphysically constituted by the perceived objects. Rather, my claim is that Schellenberg's argument fails to provide support for this view regardless of how plausible the view independently is.

That (CC) is significantly weaker than what Schellenberg needs could be seen in the three other central arguments of the book as well. In the Singular Content Argument, the Perceptual Content Argument, and the Relational Content Argument, Schellenberg, respectively, argues for the following theses:

(SC) If S perceives α , then S's perceptual state M brought about by being perceptually related to α has the property that its content is constituted by α . (p.66)

(PC) If S perceives α , then S's perceptual state M brought about by being perceptually related to α is constituted by content c in virtue of S representing α . (p.115)

(RC) If S perceives α [...], then S's perceptual state M is constituted by relational content rc in virtue of S being perceptually related to α and of S representing α . (p118)

If we rewrite these in terms of causation, we will have the followings:

(SC*) If S perceives α , then S's perceptual state M brought about by being perceptually related to α has the property that its content is partially caused by α .

(PC*) If S perceives α , then S's perceptual state M brought about by being perceptually related to α is partially caused by content c in virtue of S representing α .

(RC*) If S perceives α [...], then S's perceptual state M is partially caused by relational content rc in virtue of S being perceptually related to α and of S representing α .

Even if, according to SC*, a perceptual state's content is caused by a particular, that, contra SC, is not sufficient for that state to have singular content (assuming that it

makes sense to talk about a ‘content being caused by a particular’ since it does not make sense to say that Russellian propositions or Fregean modes of presentations are caused by particulars. Also, PC*, even if true, will not show that *M* has to be a representational state. Similarly, it seems that in RC, what Schellenberg needs is a stronger notion of constitution—i.e., metaphysical constitution. She seems to be interested in the nature of perception rather than a mere causal relation between perceptual states and perceived objects. At any rate, the causal reading, i.e., RC*, seems too weak to get at the heart of the controversy between the particularist and her opponent.

Moving from a constitutive claim, in the weak sense of constitution, to a constitutive claim in the strong sense, which we may call *the causation-constitution fallacy*, is not rare. Some enactivists make a similar move; what they intend to show is that perceptual experience is metaphysically constituted by “an activity of exploring the environment drawing on knowledge of sensorimotor dependencies and thought.”⁹ Nonetheless, what they end up showing is only a causal claim to the extent that perception is caused by such activities.¹⁰

Many philosophers agree that certain patterns of brain activities are sufficient for a subject to have a hallucination as of an object. But then those patterns of brain activities would be sufficient for having a hallucination even when they are caused in the normal way by the perceived object. This seems to pose a problem for naive realism because it means that the hallucinatory phenomenology could screen off the phenomenology of the veridical perception—hence *the screening-off problem*.

Recently, it has been suggested that this is not really a problem for the naive realist.¹¹ The reason, according to this view, is that the hallucinatory phenomenology is ‘constituted’ by deviant causal activities in the brain. But, in the veridical case, there is a *normal* causal connection between the object and the subject rather than a deviant one. Therefore, in the veridical case, the brain activities will not be sufficient

⁹Noë (2004, 228).

¹⁰Block (2005).

¹¹This is the view defended in Moran (2019).

to produce a hallucinatory experience. After all, the hallucinatory phenomenology is 'constituted' by deviant causal activities.

This line of argument is another instance of the, by now familiar, causation-constitution fallacy. What the view intends to show is that the hallucinatory experience is metaphysically constituted by deviant causal activities which are absent in the veridical case. But what has actually been shown, in the way of argument, is that hallucinatory experiences are weakly constituted—i.e., caused—by deviant causal activities. But just because hallucinations are caused by deviant causal activities does not entail that they are metaphysically constituted by deviant causation as well. Even if it turns out that deviant causation is a necessary condition for hallucination that does not show that the hallucinatory phenomenology is metaphysically constituted by deviant causation.

In a similar way, Schellenberg's arguments for the particularity of perception, perceptual content, singular content, and relational content all rely on premises that make use of the notion of constitution. These arguments are sound if 'constitution' is understood in a very weak sense. But with such a weak notion of constitution her constitutive claims will be trivial and fail to distinguish her position from that of her opponent. On the other hand, her argument for supporting the 'constitutive' claims, understood in the strong sense, relies on a principle—i.e., (C)—which seems to be false. Or, at least it is not clear how one should assess its truth in the absence of a theory of particulars—given the dependence of CI* on Premise I. Obviously there are other notions of constitution—e.g., as necessary condition, supervenience, etc.—that one might appeal to. However, none of these seem to be both weak enough to make all the relevant premises true *and* strong enough to fix the metaphysical nature of perceptual experience.

3 Schellenberg Against Russellian Content

So far Schellenberg has argued against, on the one hand, the generalist theories of perception, and on the other hand, naive realism. So, she has to adopt a view according

to which (i) perceptual experience is constituted by representational contents, and (ii) perceptual content is constituted by particulars. Among the different ways that such a view could be formulated, Schellenberg argues that perceptual content is constituted by *de re* modes of presentations of objects and properties. This rules out, among others, Russellian views according to which perceptual content is constituted by the perceived objects and their properties. She believes that her view is superior in that it does not face several difficulties that arise for the Russellian. In this section I will not be defending the Russellian. However, I'll argue that Schellenberg's view faces similar, or equally serious, problems.

A problem that Schellenberg brings up for her Russellian opponents is that gappy Russellian propositions lack enough structure to account for the difference between the phenomenal characters of a hallucination of a green dragon playing a red piano from that of a hallucination of a green elephant riding a red bicycle (p.83). The idea seems to be that both experiences will have the same Russellian content which makes it hard for the Russellian to register their phenomenal difference in terms of a difference in their contents. It seems to me that if the first hallucinatory experience has the following (complex) Russellian proposition as its content

$$\langle \dots, \text{green} \rangle \& \langle \dots, \text{red} \rangle \& \langle \dots, \dots, P \rangle^{12}$$

the second experience will have the following content:

$$\langle \dots, \text{green} \rangle \& \langle \dots, \text{red} \rangle \& \langle \dots, \dots, R \rangle^{13}$$

But these are distinct propositions. Schellenberg might have in mind a distinction between, say, a hallucination as of a green dragon playing a red piano and that of a green elephant playing a red piano. She might be thinking that these two, both, would have the following complex Russellian proposition as their contents:

$$\langle \dots, \text{green} \rangle \& \langle \dots, \text{red} \rangle \& \langle \dots, \dots, P \rangle^{14}$$

¹²While 'P' stands for the relation '... is playing ...'.

¹³While 'R' stands for the relation '... is riding ...'.

¹⁴Here I have simplified things a bit. Of course, one also needs to specify the shape properties which would differentiate the two hallucinatory experiences.

While, the contents of the two, Schellenberg might be thinking, would be different according to her Fregean proposal:

$h_1: \langle \text{MOP}_{o1}(\dots), \text{MOP}_g(\dots) \rangle \& \langle \text{MOP}_{o2}(\dots), \text{MOP}_r(\dots) \rangle \& \langle \text{MOP}_{o1}(\dots), \text{MOP}_{o2}(\dots), \text{MOP}_p(\dots) \rangle$

$h_2: \langle \text{MOP}_{o3}(\dots), \text{MOP}_g(\dots) \rangle \& \langle \text{MOP}_{o2}(\dots), \text{MOP}_r(\dots) \rangle \& \langle \text{MOP}_{o3}(\dots), \text{MOP}_{o2}(\dots), \text{MOP}_p(\dots) \rangle$

Now since

$$\text{MOP}_{o1}(\dots) \neq \text{MOP}_{o3}(\dots)$$

then h_1 and h_2 are two distinct contents which somehow explains why they have different phenomenal characters. This strategy apparently seems to succeed in differentiating the contents of those two hallucinations.

However, every solution comes at a price. What differentiates the two experiences is that the object positions are filled with different MOP's—an apparatus that the Russellian does not have in his repertoire. So, on Schellenberg's view, any two Fregean propositions of the following forms will be distinct propositions:

$$\langle \text{MOP}_{o1}(\dots), \text{MOP}_g(\dots) \rangle$$

$$\langle \text{MOP}_{o3}(\dots), \text{MOP}_g(\dots) \rangle$$

But this seems to signify a distinction without a difference. It is hard to see how two hallucinatory experiences which represent the same set of properties under the same modes of representations could be hallucinations with different phenomenal characters. Similarly, it is hard to see how two perceptions in which all the same properties are represented under the same modes of presentation could be phenomenally different. While Russellian contents are allegedly too coarse-grained, the current proposal seems to be too fine-grained, differentiating otherwise phenomenally identical states.

Another problem for the Russellian, according to Schellenberg, is to explain how a gap could be bound up by a property (p.83). Regardless of whether this is a genuine

problem for the Russellian, it is not clear why a similar problem does not arise for her own theory. If it is unintelligible how a gap could be bound up by a property, the same is true about how a gap could be grasped or represented under a mode of representation.¹⁵ Schellenberg takes MOP's to be functions from objects or property instances to singular modes of presentations (p.88). It is not quite clear how a function could return a value when not given an input.

Finally, Schellenberg argues that the Russellian has to be committed to the view that subjects represent uninstantiated properties in his account of hallucinations. This sounds implausible to Schellenberg because uninstantiated properties are not causally efficacious (p.84). Moreover, she finds this problematic because it brings with it a platonic 'two realms' metaphysics (p.83). But again her Fregean proposal faces a similar difficulty. She has already lapsed into the platonic 'two realism' metaphysics by adding the Fregean modes of presentation to her metaphysics over and above objects and their properties. According to her view, perceptual content involves, (1) objects, (2) properties, (3) MOP's—which are functions from objects/property-instances to (4) singular modes of presentations. The 'singular mode of presentation' does not seem to be either an object or a property-instance—otherwise her view would collapse into some form of Russellianism, or a combination of Russellianism and Fregeanism—which results in an ontologically more extravagant view than a simple Russellian theory of content. The problem for her is even worse since not only in the hallucinatory case, but also in the veridical case her view requires these extra entities. The proponent of this view, having been committed to functions and modes of presentation over and above objects and properties, does not seem to be on firm grounds to blame the Russellian for his platonic metaphysics.

4 Seeing Without Seeing-as

One of the advantages of her view, Schellenberg argues, is that it entails that it is possible for *S* to see *O* without seeing it as ψ , for some ψ .

¹⁵Evans (1982, §1.6).

The thesis that perception necessarily involves seeing something as something posits that perception has a sentential or proto-sentential form. If I see a green leaf, I am not necessarily aware of the leaf as green. I may just be aware of green at a particular location. When I see a landscape the content of my perception may be map-like, pictorial, or iconic without involving any kind of proto-sentential form. Map-like, pictorial, or iconic content need not have any kind of attributional structure and does not have any kind of sentential or proto-sentential form. (p.69)

Schellenberg's argument for seeing without seeing-as seems to be this: S can see a green leaf without seeing the leaf as green. Therefore, seeing a green leaf does not entail seeing the leaf as green. Therefore, seeing does not require seeing-as. Quite obviously, the second move is invalid. What this argument shows is that one could perceive O without perceiving it as ψ while O is in fact ψ . This is to say that (one kind of) perceptual error is possible which is not an entirely trivial claim but is orthogonal to whether seeing entails seeing-as. To show the possibility of seeing without seeing-as it is not sufficient to show that when one sees a green leaf one need not see it as green. Instead, what one needs to show is that it is possible that one sees the leaf but there is no φ such that one sees the leaf as φ . To put it more accurately,

Seeing without seeing-as

$$\diamond \exists S \exists O \exists t [S \text{ sees } O \text{ at } t \ \& \ \neg \exists \varphi (S \text{ sees } O \text{ as } \varphi \text{ at } t)]$$

For this to be true it must be possible for someone to have a visual experience of an object without seeing it as having any attributes such as color, shape, etc. This seems hard to imagine.¹⁶ When one has a visual experience of O , there is some φ which one sees O as φ , however there need not be a canonical φ such that for seeing O to

¹⁶One might think that under some psychological conditions—blindsighters, for instance—subjects do see without seeing as. Nevertheless, (i) Schellenberg seems to think of her view as a general thesis about “perceptual experience”, rather than a limited thesis about such abnormal cases (p.68); her example is the case in which she sees a green leaf (without seeing it as green), rather than someone with some special psychological conditions. (ii) I have argued elsewhere that it is not true that blindsighters see without seeing-as. See: [Shahmoradi \(ms\)](#).

count as seeing-as it has to involve the canonical φ . It is important to note that this by itself does not commit one to the view that the subject must also possess the specific concept of φ . Moreover, contrary to Schellenberg's claim, this need not commit one to a sentential format of perceptual representation. At least it seems that pictorial (and maybe map-like) representations could not be free of representation-as; I can't imagine how a picture could represent a green leaf without representing it as some φ .

Also, the fact that sometimes in perception we do not perceive objects is not an objection to the seeing as seeing-as view, contrary to what Schellenberg claims (p.68). According to the view that seeing entails as seeing-as:

$$\Box \forall S \forall O \forall t [S \text{ sees } O \text{ at } t \supset \exists \varphi (S \text{ sees } O \text{ as } \varphi \text{ at } t)]$$

This does not entail that perception necessarily has to be of objects.¹⁷

5 Conclusion

I have argued that (i) Schellenberg's Particularity Argument, Singular Content Argument, Perceptual Content Argument, Relational Content Argument, and finally the Argument for Mental Activism face serious challenges. Hence, she fails to rule out (or to show that her view is more plausible than) any of the three alternative views she argues against (§§2-3), and (ii) her view has some implausible implications (§4). Despite all that, *The Unity of Perception* covers a broad range of topics both in philosophy of mind and epistemology and helps the reader get a grasp of the different options that are available for reconciling particularity with a representationalist picture of perception. That provides a lot more for discussion than I could cover in a

¹⁷Here Schellenberg's target is [Burge \(2010\)](#). However, Burge is quite emphatic that although perception "is [...] constitutively as of particulars. [...] The particulars need not be events or material objects. They can be instances of properties or instances of relations." [Burge \(2010, 380\)](#). Also see [Burge \(2010, 54-55\)](#) and [Burge \(2009, 254\)](#). One could accommodate this by allowing the variable 'O' to range over other particulars, like events, or property-instances—however, to avoid certain difficulties, one needs to reformulate the thesis slightly differently. See: [Shahmoradi \(ms\)](#).

short paper.¹⁸

Bibliography

Block, N. (2005). Book review: Action in perception by Alva Noë. *Journal of Philosophy*, 102(5):259–272.

Block, N. (2013). The grain of vision and the grain of attention. *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy*, 1(3):170–184.

Burge, T. (2009). Five theses on de re states and attitudes. In Almog, J. and Leonardi, P., editors, *The Philosophy of David Kaplan*, pages 246–316. Oxford University Press New York.

Burge, T. (2010). *Origins of objectivity*. Oxford University Press.

Evans, G. (1982). *The Varieties of Reference*. Oxford University Press.

Moran, A. (2019). Naïve realism, hallucination, and causation: A new response to the screening off problem. *Australian Journal of Philosophy*, 97(2):259–382.

Noë, A. (2004). *Action in Perception*. MIT Press.

Palmer, S. (1999). *Vision Science*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Schellenberg, S. (2018). *The Unity of Perception: Content, consciousness, evidence*. Oxford University Press.

Shahmoradi, A. (ms). Seeing As Seeing-as And Thinking As Thinking-as.

Williamson, T. (1990). *Identity and Discrimination*. Wiley-Blackwell.

¹⁸This paper has benefited from comments by, and/or discussions with, Jonathan Cohen, Samuel Elgin, Matthew Fulkerson, and Brian Tracz. I am particularly grateful to Jonathan Cohen for his comments on multiple drafts of this paper and for several discussions.