Blockheads!
Essays on Ned Block’s Philosophy of Mind and Consciousness
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1 Attention and Direct Realism

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Ned Block’s excellent paper “Attention and Mental Paint” (2010) argues that pervasive experiential phenomena involving attention undermine direct realism (DR) as a theory of perception. The paper is a provocative and powerful elucidation and deployment of highly pertinent empirical findings in opposition not only to direct realism but also to its far more orthodox representational alternative. My own Object View (OV) is clearly intended to lie in the direct realist target range (Brewer 2011), although this assignment does raise substantive issues that emerge below about how best to formulate DR and about the most fundamental general differences between candidate theories of perception. In any case, I argue that OV is immune to Block’s objections and is well equipped to incorporate the various attentional phenomena that he cites. The resultant position involves an important acknowledgment in the direction that Block himself aims to illuminate with mental paint. I claim that this is perfectly compatible with the direct realist insight, though, and indeed that it is best explained and accommodated by it. I argue that the mental paint proposal is itself quite problematic. Still, the appreciation that Block demonstrates for the ubiquitous role of attention in modulating the subjective nature of perception is a source of significant theoretical progress. The correct lessons in my opinion concern the paucity and insensitivity of widespread philosophical assumptions about the phenomenological character of perceptual experience.

I begin in section 1 by setting out Block’s core objection to direct realism as he conceives of it and outlining my own basic reply. This leads to a discussion in section 2 of what seem to me to be the most important theoretical distinctions between approaches.
to the nature of perceptual experience and a sketch of my own OV.¹ In the central section 3 I develop OV to offer an account of the attentional phenomena that Block cites against direct realism. Section 4 compares this with Block’s own mental paint proposal to the advantage of OV. I conclude in section 5 with a more general discussion of the distorting effects of certain philosophical assumptions about the phenomenological character of perceptual experience and some suggestions about how to make progress in this area. Following Block and many other philosophers of perception, I focus throughout on vision.

1 Attention and Direct Realism

Block's initial formulation of the question is this: “Are phenomenological characters of perception—e.g. what it is like to experience redness or roundness—philosophically reducible to the redness or roundness of the objects one sees?” (Block 2010, 1). He claims that DR answers in the affirmative and argues that the role of attention in modulating perceptual experience entails a negative answer. So DR is untenable. The formulation of DR is a substantive topic in its own right. Block makes his target more precise as the argument proceeds, and there is additional discussion below. Nevertheless, it is worth commenting briefly on two key ideas right away.

First, the phenomenological character of perception is not an everyday notion. It is the focus of section 5 below, where I develop the basic DR insight that “what it is like” in visual perception, as Block puts it, or “the way things look,” as I prefer, should be understood in the first instance in terms of the looks, from certain points of view and in certain circumstances of perception, of particular mind-independent physical objects in the world around the perceiver. What it is like for the subject is what it—the perceived object itself—is like, for the subject, as it were. Philosophers make various assumptions about phenomenological characters, some mutually inconsistent, many insufficiently motivated. Section 5 constitutes a largely critical consideration of such constraints. For present purposes, though, I intend the most theoretically flexible and noncommittal understanding of the basic notion.

Second, Block’s question concerns the reducibility of phenomenological character and, in particular, the DR conviction that the phenomenological character of perception is somehow reducible to worldly objects and their perceived features. This notion of reduction is also notoriously slippery. One proposal suggested by some of Block’s discussion of DR is that phenomenological character supervenes on the identity and nature of the various physical objects perceived. This cannot possibly be the DR view. For an unchanging round red disc may look round and red from straight ahead in good lighting and look oval and brown from an angle in poor lighting, in senses that surely constitute some change in phenomenological character. The DR idea is rather that the conception of perception as a conscious relation of some kind with that very
thing—the round red disc itself—is the *foundation* of a correct philosophical account of the phenomenological character of the experiences in question. A great deal more must and can be said in any specific case, and I try to say some of it in what follows; but without that foundation, according to DR, nothing adequate may be said.

Block’s core objection to DR is structurally similar to that posed above by the round red disc to the simple supervenience reading of the DR reducibility claim. Variations in attention create contexts in which identical physical objects may be seen from identical points of view and in otherwise identical circumstances yet in which the phenomenological characters of the subject’s experience are nevertheless distinct. Thus, even a version of DR supplemented to accommodate experiential variation due to changing points of view and other circumstances such as lighting conditions fails. My basic reply is also the same. These are not all the materials available to DR, especially once it is acknowledged that the explanation of phenomenological character that is definitive of the position is *not* a matter of simple supervenience.

The fundamental nature of visual experience according to the version of DR that I favor and defend here is a relation of conscious acquaintance, from a given point of view and in certain specific circumstances of perception, between the subject and particular mind-independent physical objects in the world around her. Variations in attention involve her registration of different visually relevant similarities that these objects have from that point of view and in those circumstances with paradigm exemplars of various physical kinds. Thus, the various experiences that result are in a certain sense phenomenologically identical (same subject, object, point of view, and circumstances) and in other senses phenomenologically distinct (different registration of different visually relevant similarities). I argue in section 5 that this is absolutely as it should be. Any objection to DR that assumes a single monolithic notion of phenomenological character is to be rejected for that very reason.

2 Direct Realism and Its Alternatives

There are no doubt alternative approaches to the taxonomy of theories of perception, but I regard the most basic question in the area as this: What is the most fundamental nature of our perceptual relation with the physical world around us? I understand this as a request for an account of what it is to perceive physical objects that is both explanatorily adequate and metaphysically acceptable. That is to say, the proposed account should explain the characteristic features of perception, such as its phenomenological character and its role in making thought and knowledge of the physical world possible, without objectionable metaphysical excess. I see three broad categories of answer to the basic question. First, the most fundamental nature of our perceptual relation with the physical world consists in a relation of acquaintance with various mind-dependent sense-data. A subsidiary question is, then, whether these are themselves elements of a
mind-dependent physical world or whether they are, normally at least, appropriately causally dependent on sufficiently resembling mind-independent physical objects as to constitute our indirect perception of such things. Second, the most fundamental nature of our perceptual relation with the physical world consists in our representation in experience of things as being thus and so in the mind-independent world around us, roughly analogous to the way in which a belief that \( p \) involves a representation of things as being thus and so, precisely such as to render the content \( p \) true. Crucial subsidiary questions then concern the similarities and differences between various such modes of representation, and between their kinds of content, and also the relations between these and phenomenological character. Third, perception consists most fundamentally in a relation of acquaintance directly with the constituents of the mind-independent physical world itself. There is of course scope for various mixed positions; but the third, I take it, is the starting point for DR.

My own variant of DR—OV—takes the worldly relata of the acquaintance relation to be persisting (indeed, I argue, enduring) mind-independent physical objects. At least on that side of the story, as it were, the danger of metaphysical excess is relatively minimal. Acquaintance is construed as a basic unanalyzable conscious relation that we are enabled to stand in with such things by the normal functioning of our brains and perceptual systems. There is a vast amount to say in elucidating and defending this position. To put us in a position to present and reply to Block’s objection from attention, I confine myself to two key developments on the side of the explanatory adequacy of OV: first, the need for what is effectively a third relatum for the acquaintance relation, and second, the basic OV account of the ways mind-independent objects of acquaintance look in perception.

As we see above, there can be quite different perceptual experiences—had by the same subject or by different subjects—with identical physical objects of acquaintance. For example, I may view a round red disc head-on and then from a wide angle, or even edge-on, and have significantly different experiences as a result. Similarly, it looks different when viewed in bright light and in dim light. So a simple appeal to the mind-independent physical object of acquaintance itself is inadequate to explain the nature of the various distinct perceptual experiences of one and the same such thing.

The key to my response on behalf of OV is that perceptual experience is a matter of a person’s conscious acquaintance with various mind-independent physical objects from a given spatiotemporal point of view and in certain specific circumstances of perception (such as lighting conditions). These factors effectively conjoin to constitute a third relatum of the relation of acquaintance that holds between perceivers and the objects of their perception. Thus, the experiential variations noted above, and any others along similar lines, may all perfectly adequately be accounted for by variations within this third relatum. For example, head-on versus wide-angle, or edge-on, experiences involve different spatial points of view. Bright light versus dim light viewings involve different
circumstances of perception. Still, these are all cases of conscious acquaintance with the very same mind-independent physical object—that particular round red disc—with variations in the third term of the perceptual relation. The basic idea of OV is that these complex specifications of my overall perceptual relation with the particular coin in question constitute the most fundamental characterization of my experiential condition in each case.

It is one thing to have the degrees of freedom to mark all these various distinctions; it is quite another to have an adequate account of all the specific ways that physical objects actually look in perception. The core of the OV account of looks is that an object of acquaintance o looks F if and only if o has, from the point of view and in the circumstances of perception in question, appropriate visually relevant similarities with paradigm exemplars of F. The key notions here of visually relevant similarities and paradigm exemplars are ultimately best defined implicitly on the basis of a whole series of examples and illustrations; but the following theoretical principles provide preliminary guidance. Very crudely, visually relevant similarities are similarities relative to the sensitivities of the various processes underlying vision. So visually relevant similarities are identities in such things as the way in which light is reflected and transmitted from the objects in question, and the way in which stimuli are handled by the visual system, given its evolutionary history and our shared training during development. Paradigm exemplars are instances of the kinds in question, whose association with the terms for those kinds partially constitutes our understanding of those terms, given our training in the acquisition of the relevant concepts. They are paradigm exemplars of the kinds in question relative to our grasp of the concepts for those kinds.

Thus, a round red disc looks round and red from straight ahead in good lighting conditions because, from that point of view and in those circumstances, it has visually relevant similarities with paradigm exemplars of round and of red: indeed, it is a paradigm exemplar of both. It looks elliptical from an angle because from that point of view it has the following visually relevant similarity with paradigm ellipses: it projects an elliptical image onto a plane perpendicular to the viewer’s line of sight. It looks like a thin (red) bar from edge-on (in good lighting conditions) because from that angle (and in those circumstances) it has the same kinds of similarities with such a bar. It looks brown in poor lighting conditions because in those circumstances it has the following visually relevant similarity with paradigm exemplars of brown: light reflected from it arrives at the eye with approximately the same wavelength profile. Note, as these very simplistic examples illustrate, the account applies both to veridical looks, in which an object, o, that is F, looks F, and illusory looks, in which an object, o, that is not F, looks F. Of course the OV account of basic looks requires major elaboration and defense. Since Block’s objection from attention enters at the next stage, though, I leave it as a promissory note for present purposes.
3  Attention and the Object View

It is quite clear in advance of any appeal to Block’s scientific psychological results that OV as outlined so far is still wanting in explanatory adequacy. For it is blind as it stands to phenomenological variation familiar in philosophical discussions of aspect seeing. For example, switching from the duck aspect to the rabbit aspect while viewing Jastrow’s famous Duck Rabbit surely involves some change in “what it is like” or “how things look” (Jastrow 1900; see also Wittgenstein 1958, part 2, ii). Yet the object of acquaintance itself and the point of view and other relevant worldly circumstances of perception clearly remain unchanged. Indeed, Block’s own data and their accommodation within the DR framework are quite closely related to such phenomena in my view. Aspect seeing and aspect shifting are, after all, attentional achievements. In what follows I argue that the OV account of aspect seeing paves the way for incorporating Block’s particular attentional phenomena in an overall theory of perception that is still recognizably a version DR, by my lights at least.

The key additional element in the story is the idea of a subject registering the various visually relevant similarities that the object of her perceptual acquaintance has with paradigm exemplars of certain kinds. I begin with the simplest form of conceptual registration, although I also acknowledge the possibility of less demanding variants too. This leads to a crucial distinction between thin and thick looks that finally prepares the way for a proper consideration of Block’s experimental results.

First, suppose that I see a duck. According to OV, my experience consists in my conscious visual acquaintance with that very animal out there from a particular point of view and in specific circumstances of perception. Provided that the point of view and conditions are relatively normal, then the object of my acquaintance has visually relevant similarities, relative to that point of view and those circumstances, with paradigm ducks. In this sense it looks duck-like. Being an experience in which that very animal looks duck-like in this way, this is an appropriate context for the teaching and learning of the concept of being a duck—although of course much more must also be done. Such an experience is also an intelligible ground for the application of that concept by those who already have it. Still, given the actual object involved and its visually relevant similarities with paradigm ducks from the point of view and in the circumstances in question, we may also truly say that it looks duck-like even to a child without that concept. That very animal is presented from a point of view and in circumstances relative to which it has visually relevant similarities with various paradigms of ours. So we thereby convey to others who understand us a feature of what it is like even for the child. We may further register the relevant similarities with such paradigms when acquainted with a duck in perception in this way. Most important, we may note the intelligible applicability of the concept of a duck and thereby come to see it as a duck. This is a further genuinely phenomenological affair associated with our
conceptual classificatory engagement with what is directly presented to us in experience: that very duck, as we would now say.\(^7\)

Thus, the foundation of the OV account of the various ways that mind-independent physical objects look to us in perception is the simple idea that \(o\) looks \(F\) if and only if \(o\) is the object of conscious visual acquaintance from a point of view and in circumstances relative to which \(o\) has visually relevant similarities with paradigm exemplars of \(F\). I will say in such cases that \(o\) thinly looks \(F\). \(O\) thickly looks \(F\) if and only if \(o\) thinly looks \(F\) and the subject recognizes it as an \(F\) or registers its visually relevant similarities with paradigm exemplars of \(F\) in an active application of that very concept.

Conceptual phenomenology of this latter kind is not simply a matter of being caused to make a judgment employing the concept in question. It is a matter of actively and intelligibly subsuming the object of acquaintance under that concept, in virtue of its evident similarities with the paradigms central to our understanding of that concept. We may simply find ourselves with that concept in mind; but in cases of seeing \(o\) as \(F\), in which it thickly looks \(F\), the concept is evidently appropriate—to us—to that particular in virtue of the de facto existence and attentional salience of such visually relevant similarities. Note also, and importantly, that the concept \(F\) may be evidently appropriate in this way, in virtue of our conceptual registration of such visually relevant similarities, even if we know that we are subject to some kind of illusion and that \(o\) is not in fact \(F\) and so, for that reason or any other, do not actually make any judgment to the effect that \(o\) is \(F\)—although we may in such a case judge that \(o\) looks \(F\).

The mind-independent physical objects that are presented to us in perception de facto have visually relevant similarities with very many paradigms relative to our points of view and circumstances of perception. So, for example, my study carpet thinly looks blue, navy, and maximally determinate navy shade N, and many other ways too. In registering some and not others of these similarities I explicitly recognize and categorize it, for example, as navy, although, as I say, I may for some reason withhold an all-out judgment to the effect that it actually is navy. This registration makes a significant difference to the nature of my perceptual relation with the carpet. But it is absolutely not a matter of perceiving that a similarity relation obtains between the carpet and something else—not least because I do not perceive the relevant something else itself; that is, the paradigm of navy that plays a central role in my grasp of that color concept. Rather, the appropriate color concept becomes active in my experience through my recognition that the carpet that I am acquainted with is, at least apparently, an instance of that concept as I understand it. Still, I contend that thick looks as well as thin looks are a genuinely phenomenological matter.

It might be objected to this last claim that recognizing the carpet as falling under the concept navy cannot possibly make a phenomenological difference of any kind. For if it did, then it would not be possible to have two phenomenologically identical experiences of seeing the same carpet from the same viewpoint in the same circumstances, in
so that it is conceptually registered as navy in color. But this surely is possible. Indeed, it apparently follows from denying its possibility that when it is recognized as navy it somehow looks different in color; and surely that cannot be right. The reply is straightforward. Both before and after any categorization using the color concept navy, the carpet thinly looks navy; and this is a matter of constant visual phenomenology. After conceptual registration of its visually relevant similarities with paradigms of navy blue, but not before, it also thickly looks navy; and this is a phenomenological change. Any problem arises only on the assumption that there is a single uncontroversial notion of visual phenomenology, or phenomenological character, on which it makes perfectly good sense to ask, and it is always possible determinately to answer, whether two experiential conditions are phenomenologically identical tout court or have one and the same phenomenological character. The whole point of the thin-versus-thick-looks distinction is precisely to deny that assumption. All that is involved is acknowledgment of a familiar phenomenon. Recognition—of a cloud as shaped like a bull, or of a doodle as a distorted name, say—is both classificatory and phenomenological. In one sense it changes the way the thing in question looks; in another sense the shape it looks is entirely unchanged. It is surely a virtue rather than a vice of OV that it has easily to hand the materials to make this simple acknowledgment.

Consider finally the case of aspect shifting in connection with Jastrow’s (1900) Duck Rabbit (see also Wittgenstein 1958, part 2, ii). Suppose that I am simply presented with the diagram head-on in normal lighting conditions. According to OV, my fundamental perceptual condition is one of conscious visual acquaintance with that diagram. Relative to my point of view and circumstances of perception, it has visually relevant similarities with paradigms (images) of both a duck and a rabbit. It therefore thinly looks both duck-like and rabbit-like regardless of whether I notice either resemblance: perhaps I am preoccupied with other things. Suppose that I register it as duck-like: I notice its visually relevant similarities with the paradigms central to my grasp of that concept. It thickly looks duck-like, and I see it as duck-like. This is a phenomenological fact, according to OV, although one of conceptual classificatory engagement with the very diagram presented to me in perception, which continues thinly to look both duck-like and rabbit-like. Similarly, when I shift aspects and see it as rabbit-like, there is an alteration in this phenomenology of the categorization of what is presented. It now thickly looks rabbit-like when it did not do so before. Once again, and notoriously, something in the phenomenal character of my experience has changed (the way the diagram with which I am acquainted thinly looks); but something also remains the same (the ways it thinly looks from the relevant point of view in the circumstances). Only confusion and error result from demanding an unequivocal answer to the question of whether the phenomenal character of my experience is the same or different.

So far I have been focusing on the fully conceptual registration of visually relevant similarities involved in thick looks as defined above. Just as this introduces a level
of phenomenal character distinct from the thin looks constituted simply by de facto similarities, from a given point of view and in certain circumstances, between objects of acquaintance and various paradigms, there may well also be intermediate levels constituted by more primitive forms of registration of such similarities. For example, I propose accounting for certain Gestalt phenomena such as grouping by appeal to some form of basic imagistic registration of similarities with simple paradigms such as a grid of horizontal or vertical lines in the case of grouping a grid of dots as rows or as columns. Of course, such similarities may also be registered conceptually. Similarly, it would be possible to characterize the sense in which various birds look male or female to an instinctive chicken sexer in terms of her registration of their similarities with various paradigms that is constituted precisely by her reliable systematic sorting behavior itself.

In any case, the key point is that OV has available a rich and nuanced account of the various ways that the objects of our conscious visual acquaintance look. This is founded on their de facto visually relevant similarities from the point of view and in the circumstances in questions with paradigm exemplars of various kinds of such things and also exploits a range of levels of more or less sophisticated registration of such similarities in behavioral, imagistic, and conceptual categorization. I turn now to consider how this multifaceted DR account of phenomenal character may be applied to account for Block’s empirical data.

Block’s central experiment is complex, but the basic finding is this: attention boosts the apparent contrast of a Gabor patch in relation to a less attended comparator patch with constant fixation midway between the two. Thus, “if an attended Gabor patch is slightly lower in actual contrast, attention can boost its apparent contrast to the point of apparent equality of contrast between the two patches. (This effect no doubt involves decreased apparent contrast of the less attended patch.) If the two Gabor patches are the same in actual contrast, an attended patch looks higher in contrast” (Block 2010, 15). A similar effect has also been demonstrated for other perceptible features: color saturation (but not hue), gap size, size of moving objects, flicker rate, and spatial frequency. In general, attention increases acuity at the attended location in part because of the shrinking of the relevant receptive fields of neurons in the visual system.

He begins by arguing that DR cannot accommodate the evident variation in phenomenal character in such cases simply by appeal to the distinction between the objects of acquaintance as attention varies. There are cases in which this may be possible: for example, explaining the change in the phenomenal character of experience due to shifting attention from the face to the house in a complex image superimposing the two (see Tong et al. 1998). Block insists that the key Gabor patch data is not to be assimilated to these. Clearly attention does shift from one Gabor patch to the other; but the difference between the patches themselves, if any, is precisely inadequate to account for the nature of the variation in phenomenal character. It would be possible
to cite instead the distinction between acquaintance with the patch as a whole, in
the unattended case, and acquaintance with its constituent individual bands, in the
attended case; and this may indeed be the start of a DR account of the data. This is not
my own strategy, though. Block’s point at this stage is that it is the attending to one
patch rather than the other, rather than any distinction between those two objects of
acquaintance themselves, that is responsible for the crucial difference in phenomenal
character. I accept this as a desideratum of an adequate DR account.

So to work toward a proper explanation of Block’s experimental data in the context
of my own OV variant of DR, I start with what I take to be relatively uncontentious
platitudes about attending. Attending to something—to an object or to a region of
space—is focusing on it for the purposes of (better) ascertaining what it is like. Meta-
phorically, we might say that attending is interrogating the selected object or region as
to its nature or contents. Thus, attending is being engaged in, or being poised to engage
in, the discriminating registration of visually relevant similarities between the object of
acquaintance or potential acquaintance and various appropriate or paradigm exemplars
of such things. Greater (vs. less) attention is being engaged in, or being poised to engage
in, more (vs. less) discriminating such registration: increased (vs. decreased)
alertness and sensitivity to variation and contrast concerning the stimulus in question.
This involves greater registrational acuity and hence greater sensitivity to smaller dif-
fences and distinctions. Less (vs. more) attention involves failing to notice, or being
inclined to fail to notice, more, or more pronounced, small differences: the less engaged
one’s attention, the more, or more pronounced, such differences one misses. The evo-
lutionary advantage of such a situation is quite clear: attention precisely serves to focus
one’s discriminatory powers of registration where it most matters to serve one’s basic
survival and other deliberate purposes and projects.

Thus, a plain white wall with a small light-gray mark on it, viewed head-on and in
good lighting conditions, may look plain white in the absence of any focused attention
to the mark or with attention directed elsewhere, and it may look like a white wall with
a dark-gray mark when attention is focused directly on the mark itself. The wall de facto
has visually relevant similarities from that point of view and in those circumstances
with paradigms of both a plain white wall and a white wall with a dark-gray mark on it.
It thinly looks both plain white and white with a gray mark according to OV. Varying
attention is precisely the mechanism of the modulation of the subject’s registration of
these visually relevant similarities with different paradigms. Put simply, greater atten-
tion highlights contrast in what is seen by inducing the registration of similarities with
paradigms exaggerating that very contrast.

Similarly, in the experimental cases Block highlights, greater attention induces greater
sensitivity to the de facto difference in intensity between dark and light bands; less
attention induces less such sensitivity. So greater attention involves registering similari-
ties with higher-contrast paradigms, and less attention involves registering similarities
with lower-contrast paradigms. A given Gabor patch viewed from a fixed point of view
and in fixed circumstances has visually relevant similarities with paradigms lying in a range around its actual intensity. Greater attention involves greater discrimination with respect to the difference between the dark and light bands and hence induces registration of similarities with paradigms of greater intensity. Less attention involves less discrimination between light and dark bands and hence induces registration of similarities with paradigms of less intensity.

Hence OV accommodates and indeed explains precisely the empirical phenomena that Block describes.

It may be objected that the OV proposal appeals explicitly to variations in some kind of mental machinery, over and above the nature of the worldly objects of acquaintance and the subject’s point of view and other circumstances of perception, in order to account for the attentional phenomena in question. So it is automatically disqualified as a genuine DR account. This is ultimately a taxonomic worry. In outlining my initial tripartite division of basic strategies in the philosophy of perception, the defining feature of DR is the thesis that the fundamental nature of our perceptual relation with the world is to be understood in terms of a relation of acquaintance, from a given point of view and in certain circumstances, with the mind-independent objects around us. OV unquestionably adopts this strategy. Our capacity for conscious visual acquaintance with such things evidently depends on our possession of well-functioning neural machinery. Furthermore, what is phenomenally salient to us about the particular worldly objects of our acquaintance also depends on our interest and attention. But this simply serves to select among what is there to be seen, on the present proposal, resulting in the registration of some and not other visually relevant similarities. OV therefore remains, by my lights at least, firmly in the DR camp.

4 Mental Paint

Block’s own account toward the end of “Attention and Mental Paint” (2010) of the attentional phenomena that he cites is rich and fascinating. I simplify somewhat here to gain some purchase on what strikes me as its key contrast with my own OV proposal. The central idea is that perceptual experiences have “both a phenomenal mode of presentation…and a representational content,” in which “the phenomenal mode does not supervene on the representational content or conversely” (33). Variation in phenomenal mode (or “mental paint”) captures the variation induced by varying attention to a single stimulus in otherwise fixed conditions. According to OV, on the other hand, this is a matter of variation in which of the visually relevant similarities that the stimulus in question actually has with various paradigms are registered by the subject.

Both accounts rightly recognize that no illusion is involved in this variation. According to Block, it is variation on a dimension independent of truth-evaluable representational content. According to OV, it is variation in which among a range of similarities that the stimulus actually has are salient to or actively registered by the subject.
Similarly, both accounts rightly recognize that the variation does not have the *phenomenology of objectivity* (Burge 2009): there is at least a sense in which it does not even *seem* to be the experience of an objective variation in the stimulus itself. Again, Block accomplishes this by making the variation entirely independent of the representational content of perception. According to OV, on the other hand, this comes out in the extent to which variation in registration is *evidently* a variation in the recognition or registration of what is there anyway: a selection among different aspects of the stimulus itself. In one sense, the stimulus looks different, attended versus unattended, and in another it does not. As we saw with the Duck Rabbit, OV has no difficulty in simply recognizing both. The latter captures the absence of phenomenology of objectivity in the changes induced simply by variation in attention.

In any case, Block’s own solution to the problem of accommodating the kind of attentional variation that he describes in a philosophical account of perception is to postulate a dimension of purely phenomenal variation largely independent of the way that things are represented as being in the world around the perceiver or of the way that the world itself is presented in experience. The whole point of his mental paint proposal is to introduce a dimension of phenomenological variation that is entirely independent of what perception reveals about the way things are in the world. In contrast, OV retains the core DR commitment to the idea that the way things are for the subject is a matter of certain of the ways that the things that she is acquainted with actually are, from her point of view and in the relevant circumstances.

I can see two difficulties facing Block’s choice here.

First, the mental paint proposal is simply unnecessary. The purpose of “Attention and Mental Paint” (Block 2010) is to argue that neither DR nor representationism is capable of accounting for the attentional phenomena that Block cites. An additional independent dimension of variation in the nature of perceptual experience is therefore essential to do justice to them. I have argued that this is simply not true. My OV variant of DR is well equipped to handle such attentional phenomena. The postulation of additional independent theoretical resources is therefore quite uncalled for.

Second, Block’s account appears incompatible with what I offer above as relatively uncontentious platitudes about attending. Attending to something—to an object or to a region of space—I claim, is focusing on it for the purposes of (better) ascertaining *what it is like*. And I explain that OV realizes this platitude in the conception of visual attending as being engaged in, or being poised to engage in, the *discriminating* registration of visually relevant similarities between the object of acquaintance, or potential acquaintance, and various appropriate paradigm exemplars of such things: increased alertness and sensitivity to variation and contrast concerning the stimulus in question. According to Block, on the other hand, the result of increased attention is variation in a phenomenal component of perceptual experience that is *independent* of its representational content. It is therefore a modification in experience without any evident significance whatsoever for the nature or contents of the attended object or
region before the subject. In this way, Block apparently dissociates attention from the goal of enhanced awareness of the world presented in perception. It may produce a variety of glows and glosses, but these are entirely without reward with respect to the project of ascertaining what is actually going on out there.

So it seems to me that Block’s own account of the visual attention involved in the phenomena he describes is both without adequate motivation and incompatible with the basic purpose, function, and role of that very attention.

5 Phenomenological Character

The philosophical notion of the *phenomenological character* of perceptual experience has been hanging over my discussion throughout: acknowledged as controversial from the outset but hardly clarified anywhere. I end with a discussion of some of the distorting effects of certain philosophical assumptions about this notion and some suggestions about how to make progress in this area.

Note, to begin with, one important consequence of DR in the form of my own OV: meeting the explanatory adequacy requirement on a philosophical theory of perception is perfectly consistent with the idea that the constitutive philosophical accounts of experiential conditions that are in certain respects introspectively indistinguishable may be quite different from one another. For OV offers distinct constitutive accounts of such conditions that nevertheless *illuminate and explain* their introspective indistinguishability.

Examples of pairs of such cases include looking at a red wall in normal lighting conditions and a white wall bathed in red light or seeing a round disc from an angle and an elliptical disc head-on. Block’s own case of a lower-contrast Gabor patch with greater attention is also, in certain respects at least, subjectively indistinguishable from a higher-contrast patch with less attention.

This already constitutes the rejection of a widespread *assumption* about phenomenological character that Block may himself endorse; namely, that the only adequate explanation of phenomenological indistinguishability must cite an identity at the level of the fundamental philosophical characterization of the experiences in question. But I see no good reason to endorse this assumption in the presence of a perfectly adequate alternative *explanation* of phenomenological indistinguishability in spite of distinct fundamental experiential constitution, along the various lines articulated on behalf of OV above.

At the same time, the account offered here clearly also makes a significant move in the very direction that Block himself intends to illuminate with his independent nonrepresentational phenomenon of *mental paint*. For I accept entirely that phenomenological character does not supervene on facts about the condition of the world perceived, even when these are suitably expanded to include facts about the perceiver’s point of view and the relevant external conditions of perception. The phenomenological implications
of variation in registration that I set out and invoke in explanation of various atten-
tional phenomena including Block’s own data serve precisely to make the point. I have
argued that this move does nothing to undermine DR or OV, though. There is no advan-
tage and considerable disadvantage in invoking a dimension of phenomenal variation
tirely independent of the worldly objects of acquaintance and the subject’s registra-
tion of their various visually relevant similarities with paradigm of such things.

Still, I do suggest that these features of OV further undermine widespread assump-
tions about phenomenological character. But it is the assumptions rather than the
theory that are in my view to be abandoned. Indeed, the very notion of phenomenal
character itself is placed under some pressure.

It seems to be an assumption underlying the philosophical use of the notion of phe-
nomenological character that there is always a univocal clear answer to the question
with respect to any pair of experiences whether they have the same or distinct phe-
nomenal characters; but OV accounts for various phenomena in ways that suggest that
there are pairs of experiences between which this question should be given the answer
yes and no. It would be a mistake to deny that they have anything phenomenologi-
cally in common—that there is a level at which they are indeed phenomenologically
identical—but it would equally be a mistake to deny that there are genuinely phenom-
enological differences between them.

The discussion of the Duck Rabbit above serves precisely to make the point. The
figure thinly looks both duck-like and rabbit-like; it shifts from thickly looking duck-
like to thickly looking rabbit-like—as the subject registers its different visually relevant
similarities—in a way that genuinely involves a change in the way it looks, while it also
looks entirely unchanged. Very much the same pattern applies in the case of Block’s
Gabor patches. The effect of shifting attention onto a lower-contrast patch is to induce
a change in the way it looks, in that it now looks just like a higher-contrast patch in the
absence of attention. At the same time, this change has no phenomenology of objec-
tivity in that that patch itself looks unchanged. I have explained how OV accommod-
ates all these phenomena, as it must to meet the basic condition of adequacy on any
philosophical theory of the nature of perceptual experience. It does so at the expense
of a simplistic assumption about the phenomenological character of perception, but so
much the worse for the assumption.

Put slightly differently, it is a great virtue of OV, in my opinion, that it rejects any
assumption that there is a single, unequivocal, finite, and unqualified answer to the
question “What is it like for the subject?” in a given perceptual experience. Perceptual
experience is at bottom a person’s acquaintance with the particular mind-independent
physical objects in the world around him. What it is like for the subject is a matter of
what it—the relevant direct object of acquaintance—is like. So there is already good
reason to doubt the simplistic conception of phenomenological character. For there is
no single, unequivocal, finite, and unqualified answer to the question of any particular
mind-independent physical object what it is like. The correct or relevant answers to such questions are massively context and interest dependent.

Furthermore, what it is like for the subject is a matter of what the object of acquaintance is like, for the subject, where this is dependent, not just on his spatiotemporal point of view and relevant circumstances of perception, but also on which of its visually relevant similarities with paradigm exemplars of various kinds of such things are registered in various ways. This in turn is massively dependent on his context, past experience, attention, interests and goals, and so on. Furthermore, what it is relevant or right to say about all of this in conveying the way in which the subject’s experience presents the world around him also depends on the context and interests of the ascriber.

So there are multiple crosscutting layers in the rich and nuanced phenomenological character of experience, sometimes issuing in apparently contradictory verdicts in questions of similarity and difference between experiences, only resolvable by appeal to different kinds of looks and different forms of registration. It is therefore essential to show great caution and clarity in any representation of all of these within a single notion, given the homogeneity that this quite wrongly suggests. Perhaps it would be better indeed to avoid the notion of the, single, monolithic, phenomenological character of perceptual experience altogether and stick instead with the rich variety of truths about the ways things look, in the various senses outlined above, in perception. I have tried to explain how the OV variant of DR is amply equipped to do just that.

Studies on attention, as well as familiar everyday phenomena involving attention, provide an excellent tool to explore the rich variety and multilayered nature of the ways things look in perceptual experience. I have argued that neither give us any grounds to reject the core DR insight that the fundamental basis for an explanatorily adequate and metaphysically acceptable philosophical account of the nature of perceptual experience is provided by the idea of perception as a relation of conscious acquaintance with particular mind-independent physical objects. The OV elaboration of this insight simply acknowledges that any such acquaintance is possible only from a spatiotemporal point of view and in specific circumstances and will also be modulated by the subject’s registration of certain of the visually relevant similarities that the objects of acquaintance have with paradigm exemplars of various kinds of such things.

Notes

1. For extended elucidation and defense of OV, see Brewer (2011).


3. See Campbell (2009) for related discussion of this idea of consciousness as a three-place relation. Notice, though, that the control on Campbell’s third relatum—“standpoint”—comes from the requirements on Fregean sense (Frege 1993) rather than any more basic notion of perceptual presentation.
4. Again, see Brewer (2011) for detailed elaboration.

5. Pictures or images (perhaps based on description) may play the role of paradigm exemplars in certain cases, specifically, for example, in connection with nonexistent or kinds with respect to which we have no experience of actual instances.

6. See Brewer (2011, esp. chap. 5) for extended development.

7. As I elaborate further below, there may also be other less demanding modes of registration of visually relevant similarities in perception that do not explicitly draw on fully conceptual categorization. Something along these lines is plausibly involved in simple systematic sorting behavior or other robust differential responses, for example. Registration may also consist in noticing various organizational, orientational, or other Gestalt phenomena.

8. This line of objection came up in correspondence with Susanna Siegel.

9. I return to these points in section 5.

10. It has these visually relevant similarities with paradigms of both a duck and a rabbit even if I do not have either concept myself. So it thinly looks like both: either characterization by others with the relevant concepts of how things look in my experience would be (thinly) correct.

11. See section 5.

12. I argue elsewhere (2011, chaps. 2 and 3) that appeal to anything along these lines in accounting for the nature of perceptual experience effectively forces a choice between some form of anti-realism and an indirect form of realism incompatible with the basic empiricist conviction that perception is the fundamental source of at least our preliminary and provisional conception of what mind-independent physical objects actually are.

References


