Against the Conceptualist Argument against Sensory Liberalism

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Abstract

The paper addresses the question of whether the representability of high-level properties in the content of perceptual experience is compatible with a purely sensory characterization of high-level perceptual phenomenology. Two positions are distinguished, sensory liberalism and cognitive liberalism, which respectively provide an affirmative and a negative answer to the above question. After presenting the "conceptualist argument" against sensory liberalism and the main challenges that it raises, the paper proceeds to show how sensory liberalism can be defended and why it should be preferred to its main competitor within the liberal camp.

Keywords: High-level properties, Sensory liberalism, Cognitive liberalism, Conceptualism vs. non-conceptualism.

1. Introduction

A debate that has recently taken centre stage in the philosophy of perception concerns the width of the range of perceivable properties (Siegel 2006, 2010; Bayne 2009; Fish 2013; Reiland 2014; Burnston 2023). Two main parties have up to now dominated the camp, namely, the so-called conservative party that claims that that range only encompasses low-level properties (LLPs) such as colour, shape, motion (as for the visual modality), and the liberal party that claims that the range of perceivable properties also encompasses high-level properties (HLPs). The unity of the liberal camp has recently been challenged by the emergence of a position that has brought into question the way in which the liberals have characterized the nature of high-level perceptual phenomenology. Although this issue had not received much attention among the leading proponents of the liberal position, the somewhat implicit consensus was that the phenomenology of high-level perception was, like the phenomenology of low-level perception, purely sensory. And yet, some people who take themselves to be liberals have recently challenged this implicit assumption putting forward a version of liberalism that, per contraposition, can be qualified as cognitive. According to them, the perceivability of HLPs is incompatible with the supposed (purely) sensory nature of the phenomenology of the perceptual episodes in which

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they are grasped. Therefore, in their view, although perceivable, HLPs do not show up in our sensory phenomenology, being that phenomenology only confined to the appearing of LLPs. Are the cognitive liberals right in claiming that the perceivability of HLPs is incompatible with the claim that the phenomenology of high-level perception is purely sensory? This is the main question (MQ) the paper aims to address in the attempt to delve into an issue—i.e. that of the nature of high-level perceptual phenomenology—that has not yet received, in my view, the attention it deserves.

To clarify the import of the paper, let me state what I will and will not do. I will address MQ in the attempt to provide a negative answer to it, so as to show that the sensory liberal view is a legitimate position within the liberal camp. To that end I will focus on the main argument that the cognitive liberal has presented against the sensory liberal view—the so-called "conceptualist argument"—and show that it is based on questionable assumptions the sensory liberal is not compelled to endorse. Next, I shall show how the main challenges that the cognitive liberal raises against the sensory liberal can be met. So much for the positive intents. As for what I will not do, let me stress that it is not my aim here to provide any argument for the liberal claim that some HLPs are perceivable. Nor do I want to take any stance as regards which HLPs are perceivable.[1] Rather, I will take the liberal view for granted and consider whether the thesis that we (at least) sometimes perceive some HLPs puts constraints on the nature of the phenomenology of the corresponding perceptual states.

The paper unfolds as follows: in section 2, I provide a brief introduction to the debate that opposes conservatives and liberals and, on this background, introduce the contraposition, all within the liberal camp, between those who endorse and those who reject a purely sensory account of the nature of high-level perceptual phenomenology. In section 3, I present the conceptualist argument against sensory liberalism and the main challenges that the opposing position raises against it. In section 4, I show how sensory liberalism can be defended and why it should be preferred to its main competitor within the liberal camp.

2. What Is at Stake in the Debate that Opposes Conservatives and Liberals

A much-debated question in recent philosophy of perception concerns which kinds of properties human beings can *experientially* perceive, that is: which properties can show up in the phenomenal character of their experience.[2] Of course, no one doubts that there are genuinely perceivable properties for each of the various sensory modalities with which we are endowed. Nor does anyone doubt that, for example, properties such as colour, shape, location, illumination, motion (for vision), volume and pitch (for audition), odour (for olfaction) are to be included in this list. Likewise, no one doubts that there are properties that we cannot experientially perceive,

[1] Examples of high-level properties that are allowed to feature in the content of experience are, e.g.: natural kind properties, semantic properties, artefactual properties, event-causal properties (Bayne 2009; Butterfill 2009; Siegel 2006, 2009, 2010), agency properties, emotional properties, social properties, moral properties (Bayne 2009; Block 2014; Butterfill 2009, 2015; Fish 2013; Masrour 2011; Nanay 2011, 2012; Siegel 2010, 2014; Toribio 2015, 2018).

[2] It is important to stress that the debate concerns perceptual experiences, that is, *phenomenal* perceptual states, and not just perceptual states. Perceptual states may be unconscious (as is the case, for example, in blind-sight cases), but perceptual experiences cannot, they are conscious by definition.

such as being a virus, a real estate agent, a poisonous food. Although the distinction between the two classes is not generally drawn on the basis of a set of precise and well-defined criteria (something like: a property of type P is perceivable by organisms of type O in situations of type S if and only if conditions C1, …, Cn obtain), there is nevertheless some sort of criterion at play. According to this criterion, in order for a property of type P to be perceivable by an organism of type O it should be possible for O to immediately (Nes 2016; Broogaard 2018),[3] involuntarily, hence compellingly and not amendably (Toribio 2018), consciously detect its instantiation simply on the basis of how the bearers of P (phenomenally) appear to O.[4] As a matter of fact, this criterion is satisfied by the first, but not the second class of properties: one can detect the presence of a red object in one's perceptual field because being red is something that immediately, involuntarily, compellingly and not amendably manifests itself in the sensory phenomenology of one's experience (ditto for the other properties of the first class). But this does not hold for the other class of properties, either because being such a thing (i.e. being a virus) is not something that can consciously strike our senses, or because it is not associated with any distinctive and characteristic way of appearing (i.e. being a real estate agent). While the above criterion is sufficient to (intuitively) distinguish clearly perceivable from clearly non-perceivable properties, it is of little help when it comes to properties whose (conscious) perceptual detection requires more than just the smooth functioning of one's perceptual apparatus. To take an oft-cited example (Siegel 2010: 100), consider the property of being a pine-tree. Of course, pine-trees have a characteristic look (say, a pine-treeish look) that is different from the look of other types of trees. Moreover, it is precisely because they have such a characteristic look that one can acquire the ability to spot them by sight. Is this sufficient to give it the status of perceivable property? It must be admitted that there is a difference between grasping such a property and grasping a colour property such as redness, for example. While in the latter case it is enough to have open and well-functioning eyes for redness to pop out at you, in the former case something more seems required, such as (at a minimum) having acquired some recognitional ability towards instances of the property (Siegel 2006: 491). Is this sufficient to rule out that some such properties are genuinely perceivable rather than (merely) cognizable? As is often the case, there is no unanimous consensus on this issue. According to some people, usually referred to as the conservatives, the only properties that we can perceptually experience are those of the first class, that is, LLPs. In contrast, the people who challenge this restriction, the so-called liberals, argue that the range of perceivable properties is much wider, encompassing also HLPs.[5]

[3] This qualification is meant to rule out that the detection of the relevant property is achieved through some conscious inferential process involving the experiencer's background knowledge.
[4] In addition, other features are often mentioned as typical of the perceptual grasp of a property. These include for example: automaticity (Mandelbaum 2015), speed (Ransom 2019), adaptation aftereffects, pop-out effects (Block 2023). According to some people (e.g. Helton 2018: 252–3) the above-mentioned features do not provide either necessary or sufficient conditions of perceivability not only as regards high-level properties, but also low-level ones. As for the latter, according to some people (see e.g. Calzavarini, Voltolini 2022) what more has to be added is the actual involvement of a holistic form of attention (which corresponds to Nanay's 2016 fourth form of attention, focused on an object and distributed across its properties).
[5] Different proposals have been suggested for drawing the distinction between the two classes of properties. As for the "list proposal", the distinction has to be drawn by providing examples

The debate opposing liberals and conservatives thus concerns the range of perceivable properties. While not related to any particular framework about the nature of perceptual experience, this debate is normally addressed within a representationalist account of perceptual experience. According to representationalism, perceptual experiences, like any other kind of mental states (i.e. beliefs, desires), have a representational nature, that is, they are "entities" endowed with content. Accordingly, within this framework, the question at the centre of the debate concerns which properties may feature in the contents of our perceptual experiences and, therefore, which contents turn out to be admissible as possible contents of perceptual experience. While conservatives argue that only LLPs are permissible, and that therefore the content of our experience is sparse, liberals argue that typical adults *sometimes* perceive at least *some* HLPs, and that therefore the content of our experience is rich.[6] Both parties agree that experiences have content. What they disagree on, to repeat, is whether this content is sparse or rich. While conservatives defend a "Sparse Content View", liberals defend a "Rich Content View". According to liberals, human perception is rich from both a representational and a phenomenological point of view. In fact, not only do they claim that some HLPs can sometimes be represented in the content of perceptual experience (let us call this *the liberal's representational claim*), but also, and more importantly, that such represented properties are reflected in/contribute to the phenomenal character of experience (to what-it-is-perceptually-like for someone to entertain it) as much as LLPs (this is *the liberal's phenomenal reflection claim*) (Ashby 2020: 689).[7] While liberals support both representational and phenomenal richness, conservatives mostly accept representational richness but rejects phenomenal richness and support phenomenal modesty instead.[8]

Until recently, the contraposition between liberals and conservatives exhausted the logical space of the debate on the admissible contents/properties of perceptual experience. And yet, the unity of the liberal camp has newly been challenged by a version of self-declared liberalism that disputes the (purely) sensory

of low-level prototypical properties for the various sensory modalities, and then contrastively characterize HLPs as those not included in the list. The "non-supervenience proposal" (meant as providing a sufficient, albeit not necessary condition) characterizes HLPs as those properties that depend on LLPs without supervening on them (Calzavarini, Voltolini 2022). According to the "over-and-above proposal", HLPs are those properties that are represented over and above their low-level features without being represented independently of them (Burnston 2023). Finally, according to the "epistemic proposal", HLPs are those properties the representation of which requires the activation and actual deployment of capacities that do not need to be activated in order to represent LLPs (Montague 2023). Whereas the second and the third proposal can be taken to be metaphysically based, the latter is epistemically-based. By contrast, the first proposal stays neutral on both regards.

[6] Following Siegel (2006; 2010), it is custom to refer to the liberal thesis using the label "Thesis-K" (with 'K' standing for Kind). Thesis-K is the thesis that in some perceptual experiences, some K-properties are experientially perceived. Although which K-properties are admissible varies considerably within the liberal camp, any liberal admits that there are properties, not included in the list of LLPs, that we can experientially perceive and that, therefore, make Thesis-K true.

[7] For a critical discussion on the various ways in which this claim can be interpreted see Sacchi 2024.

[8] Accepting representational richness, while rejecting phenomenal richness, is tantamount to arguing that only a small subset of the perceptually represented properties is reflected in the phenomenal character of the experience, that is, the subset constituted by LLPs.

nature of high-level perceptual phenomenology. Accordingly, the liberal view has been splitted in two variants: a sensory and a non-sensory one. While agreeing that in some experiences some HLPs are experientially perceived, they disagree on the nature of high-level perceptual phenomenology which is qualified as purely sensory by the advocates of sensory liberalism and as non-purely sensory by their critics. The non-sensory liberal view comes in different sub-variants: according to one, the phenomenology in question is *sui generis*, or quasi-sensory/quasi-cognitive (Lyons 2005; Reiland 2014); according to another, it is hybrid, partly sensory and partly cognitive (Montague 2023).[9] While similar, these two sub-variants are not equivalent. For, while the latter takes perceptual phenomenology to be constituted by qualitative features traceable to ordinary kinds, the former takes it to constitute a kind of its own, unreducible to other known kinds. One could question the legitimacy of labelling them genuine liberal positions,[10] in so far as they reject an idea that, according to some liberals (Toribio 2018: 3393), is constitutive of the DNA of liberalism, namely that sensory phenomenology is thick and rich, not thin and sparse. Although I share this perplexity and consequently consider sensory liberalism to be the paradigmatic version of liberalism, I will not contest the appropriateness of applying the label 'liberalism' also to the other positions.

In what follows I shall focus on Montague's proposal which she labels (in a somewhat infelicitous way) the "cognitive liberal view".[11] Montague's proposal qualifies as liberal insofar as it admits that (at least some) HLPs are not only represented in the content of perception (the liberal's representational claim) but also show up/reverberate in its phenomenal character. And yet, its hybrid nature shows up in the fact that it sides with the conservatives in claiming that sensory phenomenology is thin, not thick (purely confined to the appearance of LLPs).

The main issue under discussion between the sensory and the cognitive liberal views thus concerns the nature of the phenomenology of high-level perceptual experience. This is an issue that has not been addressed much within the liberal camp so far. Settling the issue requires considering what are the capacities/mechanisms/events that give us access to HLPs. Are them on a par with the ones that give us access to LLPs? If they are not, what follows from that? In this regard, it is important to consider a difference we previously mentioned between the perceptual grasp of low-level and high-level properties. The perceivability of the former is "relatively cheap". For example, to perceive the redness of a poppy in your garden you only need to have a normal, well-functioning visual system, being in the presence of normal lighting conditions and, of course, having the red poppy in view. By contrast, the perceivability of HLPs seems to be far "less cheap". In fact, to experientially perceive the property of being a poppy it is not enough to see a poppy. Rather, you have to be able to see it *as* a poppy. The question to consider is thus whether it is possible to explain what is required to see something as an object of a certain kind in a way that preserves the thesis that the phenomenology of the corresponding perceptual episode is purely sensory. Cognitive liberalism maintains that this is not possible and that therefore sensory

[9] A third sub-variant is theoretically possible, namely one that claims that the phenomenology in question is purely cognitive. As far as I know no one has adopted it.

[10] Reiland, who is an advocate of *sui generis* liberalism, considers this perplexity in his 2014: ft. 13.

[11] A more appropriate label would have been "sensory-cognitive", because she admits that high-level perceptual phenomenology is only partly cognitive.

liberalism does not qualify as a viable position within the liberal camp. In the next section, I consider the main argument that Montague presents in support of this claim. My aim, as I have stressed in the Introduction, is to defend the sensory liberal position against the attack of this new brand of liberalism.

3. The Conceptualist Argument

Montague addresses the question as to what is required to represent HLPs in the content of one's experience in accordance with her epistemic way of drawing the wedge between LLPs and HLPs.[12] The endorsement of a conceptualist position as regards the kind of capacities subjects need to possess to represent the latter, and a cognitive phenomenology thesis as regards the phenomenal character of concepts-deploying states (which correspond respectively to premise 1 and 2 of the argument below), lead her to conclude that cognitive liberalism is the preferable sub-variant within the liberal camp.[13] The conceptualist argument that Montague presents in support of cognitive liberalism runs as follows (Montague 2023: 238-39):

(1) The representation of high-level properties requires the deployment of concepts;
(2) The deployment of concepts is necessarily associated with cognitive phenomenology;
(3) Therefore, the representation of high-level properties is necessarily associated with cognitive phenomenology (1, 2);
(4) When high-level properties are represented in perception, they are necessarily associated with cognitive phenomenology (2, 3).[14]

It is important to clarify that the general aim Montague is pursuing in this work goes far beyond the issue concerning which version of liberalism is preferable. In fact, as she explicitly states, she aims to contest the widespread tendency in contemporary philosophy of perception to draw a sharp/fundamental wedge between perception and cognition. While accepting the phenomenological datum that there is a "felt difference" (i.e. a difference that we first-personally grasp) between the two kinds of states, she does not consider this datum sufficient to draw a fundamental distinction (i.e. a distinction in nature) between them. In her view, in fact, the fundamental distinction to be drawn is not between perception and cognition, but rather between sense and cognition. On this basis, she introduces a terminological revision using the term 'cognition' to indicate a subject's deployment of a concept in the having of a mental state. According to such revisionary use, "any mental state, including some perceptions, which involve the deployment of a concept, counts as involving cognition" (Montague 2023: 231). So, in

[12] Montague in fact claims that the distinction, in so far as it is of interest for the philosophy of mind is best understood not in terms of a deep metaphysical difference between the two kinds of properties, but rather in terms of the types of mental capacities subjects of experience may or may not possess.
[13] Actually, if she is right, cognitive liberalism would turn out to be the only viable position within that camp.
[14] As evidence that Montague's is a hybrid position, and not a purely cognitive one (as by the way the label she uses might suggest), there are passages in which she is explicit on the hybrid nature of perceptual phenomenology. In fact, as she says, "For creatures like us, all conscious perception involves concept deployment and this involves cognitive phenomenology in addition to whatever sensory phenomenology it also involves" (2023: 235).

her view, all the ongoing attempts to mark off the domain of perception from the domain of cognition are on the wrong track,[15] because, some important differences notwithstanding, they both fall on the same side of the divide.[16] The relevant distinction to draw in her view is rather that between sensing and cognizing, and such a distinction can be drawn in phenomenological terms, in so far as, she claims, the two domains are characterized by two proprietary and irreducible kinds of phenomenology, namely and respectively, sensory and cognitive.

Before discussing the conceptualist argument and consider the manoeuvring space available to the sensory liberals it is important to clarify why they cannot avail themselves here of a line of answer illustrated by Siegel (2006: 494) in the context of the presentation of the "phenomenal contrast argument" in support of liberalism.[17] The case presented by Siegel is aimed to discredit the cognitive explanation of the phenomenal contrast between the overall experience (O1) of which E1 (the contrasting experience) is a part and the overall experience (O2) of which E2 (the target experience) is a part. The cognitive explanation, in fact, would prevent the argument to go through by challenging its first premise, arguing that O1 and O2 differ in phenomenal character because O2 includes a part with a non-sensory phenomenal character that O1 lacks. In discussing this move, Siegel assumes that the

[15] For an overview of the main proposals to mark off perception from cognition see e.g. Nes *et al*. 2021; Clarke, Beck 2023. According to the way in which the proposals are classified, Montague's position could be taken to fall under the label "eliminationism", being it the position that rejects the existence of a perception-cognition border.

[16] That perception and cognition have to be classified together is not new in the history of philosophy. This position has been clearly endorsed by Brentano (1874/1973), for example, who distinguishes between three fundament kinds of mental acts ('psychic phenomena' in his terminology), namely, Presentations (*Vorstellungen*), Judgements (*Urteile*) and Emotions/Interests (*Gemütsbewegungen*) and claims that perceptions belong to the category of judgments because like them they aim at the truth, at how things actually stand.

[17] So-called "phenomenal contrast-arguments" are arguments involving a pair of experiences (a "contrasting experience" and a "target experience") that are supposed to differ in their phenomenal character but not in their low-level properties. In Siegel's (2006) classic "pine-tree case" we are asked to consider the following: we are hired to cut down the pine-trees in a forest without having any botanical expertise. The hirer tells us in t1 what the pine-trees are, and, and, on this basis, we begin doing the work. Let us label our visual experience of pine-trees in t1, E1 (E1 is the contrasting experience). As time passes, we progressively improve our ability to distinguish pines from non-pines and, at some point, say at t2, we become able to immediately spot the former. Let us label our visual experience of pine-trees in t2, E2 (E2 is the target experience). At this stage, all the liberal asks us to admit is the minimal intuition that the overall experience of which our contrasting experience is a part differs phenomenologically from the overall experience of which our target experience is a part. Assuming this premise, the argument moves toward the conclusion that what best explains the assumed phenomenal difference is that the target experiences, but not the contrasting experience, represents some K-properties (in the scenario considered the property of being a pine-tree). The phenomenal contrast argument can be schematized as follows: (0) The overall experience (O1) of which E1 is a part differs phenomenologically from the overall experience (O2) of which E2 is a part; (1) If the overall experience (O1) of which E1 is a part differs phenomenologically from the overall experience (O2) of which E2 is a part, then there is a phenomenological difference between the sensory experiences E1 and E2; (2) If there is a phenomenological difference between the sensory experiences E1 and E2, then E1 and E2 differ in content; (3) If there is a difference in content between E1 and E2, it is a difference with respect to the K-properties represented in E1 and E2 (Siegel 2006: 491).

most natural account that the objector could provide of the nature of this supposed part is to take it to be a conscious event of judging that this is F (with 'F' designating a HLP). On the basis of this interpretation, she presents a case aimed at showing that such a move—as any other move that involves a "committal attitude"—does not work. The case in question, known as the "hologram case" asks us to consider a situation in which an expert pine-spotter gets told that what she is looking at is not a real forest with real pine-trees, but an elaborate hologram. If the cognitive phenomenal account were true, then the experience the pine-trees expert would entertain after having been told that what she is looking at is not a true pine-tree, but a hologram, would be more or less like the experience of the non-expert (or like the one the expert used to have before acquiring her expertise). And yet her experience does not change. According to Siegel, the case presented should debunk the cognitive move. And yet, as several people have shown, her line of attack against the cognitive explanation of the phenomenal contrast argument presents severe limitations in so far as it can only be applied to committal attitudes like beliefs for example, whereas concepts can be involved in many other ways, making the cognitive move less easily attackable than one could have thought. In fact, concepts can be involved in mental episodes like "it seems to us that this is F" which are non-committal at all (Reiland 2014: 180), or even in judgments that do not require believing that things are as they perceptually seem (Block 2023).[18] Moreover, and this is Montague's opinion, they can be involved because concepts partly constitute the intentional content of perceptual experiences. Her idea is that just as a concept can be deployed in a judgment, it can be deployed in a perceptual experience without any need to claim that there are any additional judgments that accompany it (Montague 2017: 2053).

Let us now come back to Montague's conceptualist argument. Since premise 3 follows from premises 1 and 2, and premise 4 follows from premises 2 and 3, the only way in which the sensory liberal could reject the argument is by rejecting either 1 or 2. According to Montague, premise 1 is in line with what Siegel, and more generally the liberals, say as regards the representation of HLPs. In particular, she says, it is in line with the claim that the perception of HLPs requires the acquisition on the experiencer's part of recognitional capacities/dispositions. It is true, as Montague accurately acknowledges, that Siegel never explicitly articulates her view in terms of the deployment of concepts. And yet, Montague adds "unless she has something like the deployment of concepts in mind when she talks about recognitional capacities her view becomes very unclear" (Montague 2017: 2054 fn. 12).

An infelicitous way in which the sensory liberal could reject premise 1 in the argument, while subscribing to the equation between recognitional capacities and concepts, would be to say that all that the perceptual representation of HLPs requires is just the subject's possession of the relevant concepts, not their actual deployment in the having of the experience. This would be an infelicitous move, because it would leave unexplained precisely what the phenomenal contrast argument aims to explain, namely: the change in phenomenal character between the experiences had before and after the acquisition of the relevant expertise. The phenomenal contrast at issue should be explained by what is taken to be required

[18] Block labels events like "it visually seems there is an F before me" 'minimal immediate direct perceptual judgment', and claims that, while distinct from truly perceptual episodes, they are the most difficult to distinguish from them (Block 2023: 299).

to experientially represent a given HLP. If what is required is the acquisition of the relevant concepts, then this acquisition should reverberate in the phenomenology of the experience, and this requires that the concepts involved are actually deployed.

Another infelicitous move on the part of the sensory liberal would be to deny premise 2 on the ground that there is no cognitive phenomenology. Although there is no unanimous consensus on this issue—and in fact some people deny that there is a proprietary kind of cognitive phenomenology, unreducible to the phenomenology of sensory states—and the sensory liberal is free to take whatever position she wants as regards the existence and nature of cognitive phenomenology, if the sensory liberal reacted to the conceptualist argument in this way it would be tantamount to saying that the liberal sensory view is the correct one because all phenomenology is sensory. But this would presuppose what needs to be demonstrated. Moreover, according to Montague, if the sensory liberal made this move and claimed that the phenomenology of high-level perception is purely sensory, she would have trouble accounting for the difference between low-level and high-level perceptual phenomenology. In fact, she claims, if both were sensory, there would be no phenomenal difference among them. Yet, she adds, there should be, since there is a notable difference between how things come to look F in the two cases,[19] and this difference plausibly makes a difference to the phenomenological character of the respective experiences. It follows that, from the point of view of the cognitive liberal, no move the sensory liberal could make to contrast the conceptualist argument looks promising. In fact, if premise 1 is rejected, the sensory liberal view deprives itself of the most plausible explanation of what is involved in the acquisition of recognitional abilities. If premise 2 is rejected, the sensory liberal view cannot explain the difference between low and high-level perceptual phenomenology. All in all, and to conclude this part, the liberal cognitive view should be preferred to the liberal sensory view because it would provide a clear explanation of what acquiring recognitional capacities amounts to, and it would account for the difference between low-level and high-level phenomenology in terms of sensory and cognitive (or sensory-cognitive) phenomenology, respectively. Against this verdict in the next section I shall show that not only can the sensory liberal resist the conceptualist argument, but also that she does not incur the negative consequences threatened by the cognitive liberal.

4. How to Resist the Conceptualist Argument

What the sensory liberals should do to contrast the conceptualist argument is precisely to reject the conceptualist assumption (premise 1 in Montague's argument) on which the argument is based. In fact, if that assumption is endorsed, then, unless they deny the very existence and irreducibility of cognitive phenomenology, there is no way in which the argument could be blocked in a straightforward, non-question-begging way. As I said, the rejection of 2 (grounded on the claim that there is no proprietary, irreducible cognitive phenomenology) is, in principle, as viable an option as the rejection of 1. And yet, it would be odd if the truthfulness of sensory liberalism depended on the falsity of a thesis utterly unconnected with it. As I said

[19] "Looking green and shaped" she says, "is produced by our sensory mechanism and the causal interactions between the environment and our sensory mechanism" (Montague 2023: 242). By contrast, she adds, our sensory mechanism alone cannot produce something looking treelike.

in the previous section, the rejection of 2 would be an ad hoc move for the sensory liberal to make, insofar as it would ultimately amount to assuming what has to be demonstrated. So, to repeat, the best way out from the conceptualist argument is in my view to reject conceptualism through and through, both as regards the content of perception and as regards the conditions enabling the representation of HLPs. But can the sensory liberal view dispense with conceptualism? Moreover, is conceptualism explicitly endorsed by the main advocates of the view?

It must be said that, so far, this issue has not received much attention within the sensory liberal camp, and even as regards one of its most representative advocates, such as Siegel for example, it is far from clear whether she endorses conceptualism or rather rejects it. Given the lack of clear and explicit statements on this issue, it is not surprising that several people have interpreted Siegel as endorsing conceptualism, at least as regards the kind of mental capacities the subjects of experience have to acquire and deploy in the representation of HLPs. This is so with Montague for example, for whom the claim that the representation of HLPs requires the deployment of concepts is perfectly in line with Siegel's assertion about the perception of HLPs requiring the acquisition of recognition capacities by the experiencer. Montague is not, however, alone in interpreting Siegel as endorsing conceptualism as regards high-level perception. Other people have done the same (Brogaard, Chomanski 2015; Block 2023: 299), in particular, on the ground of what Siegel says about the relationship between high-level perception and cognitive penetration. In fact, while claiming that cognitive penetration is neither necessary, nor sufficient for high-level perception (2012: 207), Siegel explicitly endorses the claim that, in many cases, experiences representing HLPs are likely to be cognitively penetrated. But if this is true, it follows—at least if the classical model of cognitive penetration is endorsed—that high-level perception is (in many cases, though perhaps not in all) conceptual. I am not here interested in settling any exegetical issues as to what the correct interpretation of Siegel's position is. I rather want to stress that if the sensory liberals care to defend their position they ought to get rid of conceptualism. And, if to do so they have to discard the cognitive penetrability thesis (at least in its classical, strong reading), they should abandon that one too.

Besides cognitive penetration, is there some further reason that could motivate a liberal to endorse conceptualism as regards (at least) high-level perception? Montague thinks so and provides the following train of reasoning in support of the claim that the representation of HLPs requires the deployment of concepts. According to Montague, in order for S to represent in her experience the property of being a pine tree, S has: (i) "to recognize the tree as a pine tree in the having of the experience"; (ii) "recognition is roughly to identify something as encountered before"; (iii) "concepts are necessary for reidentification in so far as they are what allow for a judgment of 'same again'" (2023: 240). One could object that the fact that concepts are required for "same-as" judgments, does not imply that they are required for "same-as" perceptual recognition, unless one also assumes that perceptual recognition implies judgement. But no argument has been provided in support of this assumption. Maybe Montague does not feel the need to back this assumption, since she characterizes concepts as follows:

> First, concepts are necessary for reidentification; they are what allow fundamentally for a judgment of 'same again' […] Second, concepts unify and organize a subject's perceptual array into separable and countable objects […] Finally,

> concepts are essential for a subject's having certain kinds of rational and inferential sensitivities (Montague 2023: 234–235).

And yet, it is fair to say that this is a rather demanding characterization of what concepts are, one that the sensory liberal is not at all compelled to accept.

The idea that perceiving-as does not necessarily involve the mobilization of concepts has been defended by many people in the debate (Orlandi 2011; Overgaard 2022; Block 2023). In his 2022, Overgaard criticises the way in which seeing-as has been traditionally understood—i.e. as a form of seeing-that—and, against this tendency he argues for a different account which treats seeing-as as a form of seeing-o (seeing a particular—object, event, property instantiation). On this ground, the sensory liberal could claim that the idea that seeing-as requires conceptualization stems from the widespread, yet erroneous, tendency to assimilate it to seeing-that, but that this tendency ought to be resisted. Analogously, in his 2023, Block claims that the thesis that seeing-as requires conceptualization originates from the mistaken inclination to conflate perception and perceptual judgement. But, in his view, this conflation should be resisted by distinguishing two different kinds of seeing-as, namely: perceptual seeing-as (in which a property is *perceptually* attributed to something) and conceptual seeing-as (in which a property is *conceptually* attributed to something). Only in the second case concepts are applied, but for Block, "conceptual seeing-as" is not perception, but perceptual judgement. Within truly perceptual episodes of seeing-as, Block distinguishes a case that, besides involving property attribution, also involves the deployment of perceptual categories. Categorical perception, he claims, does not require conceptualization and can occur both at the low-level (i.e. perceptual categories for colours) and at the high-level (for example, perceptual categories for numerosity, causality). By adopting such a framework, which, among other things, is supported by a considerable amount of experimental work, the sensory liberal could thus account for what acquiring and exercising recognitional capacities amount to without equating them with concepts, but rather with perceptual categories.

To provide a complete response to the cognitive liberal's attack, a last point has still to be addressed, namely: accounting for the phenomenal difference that should exist between low-level and high-level perception due to the undisputable fact that how things come to look F in the two cases is very different. Is the cognitive liberal right in claiming that the sensory liberal cannot account for this difference because "The sensory view is committed to the claim that things 'looking some way' is all of a piece […] and so things can look treelike in whatever way things can look green and thus and so-shaped" (Montague 2023: 242)? Well, it is true that for the sensory liberals both low-level and high-level perceptual phenomenologies are sensory and that this is so because, in opposition to the conservatives and the cognitive liberals, they maintain that our perceptual experiences are sensorily rich. But from this it does not follow that they are compelled to say that there are no differences in how things sensorily look. To think otherwise is to assume that high-level content is on a par with low-level content and that there cannot be any difference in the move from one level to the other as regards the way in which the content at the two levels is represented. This assumption might be prompted by the fact that both levels are taken to be nonconceptual. If both are nonconceptual—our objector might argue—how could there be any difference in the way the represented properties appear to the subject? A difference there may be, she might add, only if the properties at the two levels are not represented in

the same way; but the non-conceptualist position, unlike the conceptualist one, is not equipped to account for this difference. I agree with the first part of this statement, but not with the second. In fact, I think it is entirely compatible with non-conceptualism to claim that high-level contents, albeit nonconceptual, have a different structure from low-level contents.

In the remaining part of the paper, I would like to sketch out the broad outlines of a proposal that I think might be congenial to the sensory liberal. The proposal I am going to present draws on recent works on high-level contents, and, in particular, on Burnston (2023). In a nutshell, my proposal is the following: the contents of perceptual experiences in which HLPs are represented have a higher degree of structuration/organization than the content of perceptual experiences of low-level properties (even though both contents are nonconceptual), and this difference at the level of structuration/organization of content is reflected in their phenomenology so as to bring about a difference in how things look. My proposal can be taken as an extension of the "liberal's phenomenal reflection claim": what is reflected in the phenomenology of a given perceptual experience are not only the properties that are represented in the content of the experience, but also the structure of the contents in which those properties are represented. My proposal endorses non-conceptualism both in the content sense (Heck 2000)—the content of the state does not have concepts as constituents—and in the state sense (Cussins 1990; Peacocke 1992, 2001)—the subject of the state needs not possess any of the concepts required to specify its content in order to be in it. That perceptual content, while nonconceptual, can have a structure and that this structure can have different degrees of complexity is a point that several advocates of non-conceptualism have made (Peacocke 1992; Pacherie 2000). But how would HLPs be represented in a non-conceptualist framework? Although this issue has not been the focus of much attention in the relevant literature, some recent works are starting to fill this gap, particularly in relation to the debate over the scope of perceivable properties.

As I said, a proposal that I believe holds great promise and could be put to the service of the sensory liberal cause is the one developed by Burnston (2023) on the heels of a previous proposal by Gauker (2017). By focusing on the liberal thesis, Burnston criticizes how the thesis has been interpreted by what he labels the standard "as such" condition, which suggests that perception must represent HLPs independently of LLPs, and argues that this condition leads to negative dialectical consequences and should therefore be abandoned. High-level properties cannot be represented independently of low-level properties: one cannot represent the property of being a pine-tree, say, in the content of one's perception without representing (also) a collection of low-level properties (colour of the leaves, shape of the trunk, colour of the bark). And yet, although HLPs cannot be represented independently of LLPs, they are represented as something "over and above" the basic, low-level properties (or congeries thereof). But how is this "over and above" condition to be cashed out? In addressing this question, Burnston proposes to extend the view that basic perceptual features are represented in terms of "quality spaces"—a view that is standard in colour perception, for example—to high-level perceptual features. The upshot of this move is what he labels the "extended perceptual space" (EPS) view according to which HLPs are represented as distinctive patterns of variations amongst the lower-level features on which they depend. To understand his proposal, a number of concepts need to be clarified, namely: the notion of *space*, and the notion of *dimensions* comprising a

given space. A space is characterized as an ordering of instances. In the colour space, for example, the instances are the colours which are put in ordered relationships according to some specific parameters (hue, saturation, brightness). The *parameters* are the dimensions comprising a given space. Any dimension represents a variation among some quality: the brightness dimension, for example, is a way that colours can vary. Based on this framework, he proposes to extend the standard notion of perceptual space to include higher-order dimensions in addition to the standard ones. "What it means to be an extended space", he clarifies, "is to be a space comprising higher-order dimensions—ones that capture patterns of co-variation across other dimensions" (Burnston 2023: 1173).

By adopting a theoretical framework like the one indicated, I think that the sensory liberal could account for the difference between low and high-level perceptual phenomenology by claiming that what ultimately distinguishes them is the kind and degree of structuration of the sensory "qualitative space". Thus, contrary to the cognitive liberal claim, sensory liberalism is not at all compelled to say that things "looking some way" is all of a piece. Sensory liberalism seems to be perfectly compatible with the idea that sensory phenomenology, albeit homogeneous and irreducible to any non-sensory phenomenology, may present internal differences.

If what has been said so far is on the right track, it can be stated that the sensory liberal view does not run into the problems raised against it by the cognitive liberal insofar as (i) it can provide an account of what acquiring recognitional abilities amounts to without equating them with concepts, and (ii) it can account for the difference between low-level and high-level perceptual phenomenology while taking both as sensory.

Not only that. Let me conclude by saying that the sensory liberal view is not only a viable option but should also be preferred to its main rival within the liberal camp for at least a couple of reasons. Firstly, because it best guarantees the mandatory, irresistible, fast, automatic and highly stimulus driven nature of the perceptual representations of HLPs (Toribio 2018). Secondly, because as many people in the debate have claimed (Peacocke 2001, Toribio 2007 Macpherson 2015) there are several features of perceptual experiences which are best accounted for by ascribing them nonconceptual rather than conceptual content. One crucial feature is that by adopting non-conceptualism one can provide a non-circular account of the acquisition of perceptually based observational concepts. Overall, I believe that the sensory version of liberalism is much more promising than the cognitive version that has recently entered the debate.[20]

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