

# STILL PARTICULAR: A REPLY TO GANSON AND MEHTA

Craig French<sup>†</sup> & Anil Gomes<sup>‡</sup>  
<sup>†</sup>Trinity Hall, University of Cambridge  
<sup>‡</sup>Trinity College, University of Oxford

[Archived May 2016]

## 1. Introduction

We are grateful to Ganson and Mehta (forthcoming) for their reply to our defence of phenomenal particularism against the objections raised by Mehta in his (2014). Their reply clarifies the nature of their objections to phenomenal particularism and helps identify the locus of our disagreements. In what follows we aim to defend phenomenal particularism against the objections raised in their reply.

Ganson and Mehta raise and clarify two objections from Mehta (2014). The first concerns the presentation of the same object in different sense-modalities; the second concerns the experiences of an ideal imaginer. We discuss each in turn.

## 2. Lack of Similarity

Mehta introduces the first problem in his (2014) in the following way: ‘Broadly stated, the objection is that the phenomenal particularist makes implausible predictions about similarities and differences in phenomenal character’ (p.317). This challenge is raised via what we’ll call the *Wine Case*: a case involving a pair of experiences, (A1) a visual experience of a quantity of wine in a glass, and (A2) a tactile experience of the very same

quantity of wine spread out on one's lap after a spillage (p.318). What is the problem for phenomenal particularism supposed to be here?

Ganson and Mehta introduce phenomenal particularism as the view that 'external particulars... are sometimes part of the phenomenal character of experience. To say that a particular is *part of the phenomenal character of an experience* is to say that an exhaustive characterization of what the experience is like for the subject of the experience must reference *that very particular*; otherwise the characterization is incomplete' (p.1). Let the parts of an experience be its *character-parts*. And let any character part which is a particular be a *p-character-part* – where 'p' stands for particular. Phenomenal particularism is the view that the phenomenal character of experience has p-character-parts.

In the Wine Case, A1 and A2 have a *numerically identical p-character-part* since the same portion of wine is a character-part of each. In our (2016) we showed that this doesn't entail, for the particularist, that these experiences have *the same phenomenal character*. Indeed, even *complete* sameness of p-character-parts doesn't entail that the experiences have the same phenomenal character. Phenomenal character is understood in terms of what it is like for a subject to undergo an experience (Mehta 2014, p.311). Sameness of phenomenal character is thus understood as follows:

(P-Identity) Experiences X and Y are phenomenally the same (the same in phenomenal character) just in case what it is like to undergo X is the same as what it is like to undergo Y.

We spelled out in our (2016) how the particularist can accept that what it is like for S to undergo an experience X can be different from what it is like for S to undergo an experience Y *even when X and Y have all the same p-character-parts*. For the particularist can hold that the *standpoint* from which we perceive the particulars we do makes a difference to the phenomenal character of experience, and thus sameness of p-character-parts, doesn't entail phenomenal sameness. In the Wine Case, the particular portion of wine which is part of A1 is perceived from a different standpoint to the same particular portion of wine which is part of A2, and this difference in standpoint can explain why the experiences have different phenomenal characters.

Thus the particularist is not committed to the idea that A1 and A2 are phenomenally the same, even if A1 and A2 have numerically the same p-character-parts. And if the objection to particularism is that it predicts phenomenal sameness between A1 and A2, then the objection fails.

However,

Mehta's worry about phenomenal particularism is not that the view predicts *no phenomenal differences* between the two experiences where there are some; rather, the worry is that the view mistakenly predicts at least one phenomenal similarity where there are none. There is no similarity in what the two experiences are like for the subject, but phenomenal particularism predicts at least one similarity in virtue of the fact that these are experiences of the same portion of wine (Ganson and Mehta, p.4).

The objection, then, is not that A1 and A2 are phenomenally the same, but that they are phenomenally *similar*. Does this mean that the remarks about particularism mentioned above are ineffective? We think not. For we want to suggest that the argument here fails for reasons similar to those we sketched above.

We can reconstruct this argument as follows:

1. A1 and A2 have no phenomenal similarities.
2. Phenomenal particularism predicts that A1 and A2 have some phenomenal similarity.

Therefore

3. Phenomenal particularism is false.

We will argue that premise (2) is false: phenomenal particularism does not predict that A1 and A2 have some phenomenal similarity. The grounds Ganson and Mehta have for assuming that the particularist is committed to the claim that A1 and A2 are phenomenally similar is that A1 and A2 have *some sameness of p-character-parts*. But we will argue that just as sameness of p-character-parts doesn't imply phenomenal *identity*, nor does it imply phenomenal *similarity*.

Ganson and Mehta don't spell out phenomenal similarity, but this seems like a plausible way to understand the notion:

(P-Similarity) Experiences X and Y are phenomenally similar when there is an aspect of the phenomenal character of X, X\*, and an aspect of the phenomenal character of Y, Y\*, such that what its like to undergo X insofar as it has X\* is the same as (identical to) what its like to undergo Y insofar as it has Y\*.

For example, S has an experience of a red tomato, (call this experience T), later she has an experience of a glove of the very same colour, (call this experience G). These two experiences are phenomenally similar in that they exhibit some *sameness* in what it is like to undergo them. That is, there is an aspect of the phenomenal character of T pertaining to the redness of the tomato (call this aspect T\*), and an aspect of the phenomenal character of G pertaining to the redness of the glove (call this aspect G\*), and what it is like to undergo each experience insofar as they have these aspects, is the same. That is, what it is like to undergo T *qua* T\* = what it is like to undergo G *qua* G\*.

P-Similarity doesn't imply P-identity for it is compatible with two experiences having aspects in common that they have aspects which are different. That is, there may be *other* aspects of phenomenally similar experiences which generate differences in what it is like to undergo them. For instance, the aspect of the character of T pertaining to the round bulgy shape of the tomato (T\*\*), and the aspect of the character of G pertaining to the hand-like shape of the glove (G\*\*) generate such differences: what its like to undergo T *qua* T\*\* ≠ what its like to undergo G *qua* G\*\*.

We can now understand Ganson and Mehta's challenge. They hold that although A1 and A2 share a p-character-part, there are no phenomenal similarities between A1 and A2. And they think that phenomenal particularism is committed to there being such a similarity. We will grant Ganson and Mehta the first claim. For phenomenal particularism is not committed to there being any such similarities.

Why think that phenomenal particularism is committed to a phenomenal similarity? Ganson and Mehta write that 'phenomenal particularism predicts at least one similarity in virtue of the fact that these are

experiences of the same portion of wine' (p.4). That is, Ganson and Mehta take the phenomenal particularist to be committed to the following:

(Particularist Prediction) What it is like to experience A1 *qua* its wine aspect A1\* is *identical to* what it is like to experience A2 *qua* its wine aspect A2\*.

If the particularist is committed to the following, what it is like to experience A1 *qua* A1\* is constituted entirely by its p-character-part, the wine, *and* what it is like to experience A2 *qua* A2\* is constituted entirely by its p-character-part, the wine, then (Particularist Prediction) is a commitment of particularism, and (2) holds.

But the Phenomenal Particularist is *not* committed to the above claims, for reasons rehearsed above – which we can now put with respect to P-Similarity, not P-Identity. The particularist can reject the idea that what it is like to undergo A1 *qua* A1\* is *wholly constituted* by its wine character-part. For this aspect of the phenomenal character of A1 – call it P1 – is something the particularist will capture in terms of acquaintance with the wine *from a particular standpoint*. Likewise, the particularist can reject the idea that what it is like to undergo A2 *qua* A2\* is *wholly constituted* by its (identical) wine character-part. For this aspect of the phenomenal character of A2 – call it P2 – is something the particularist will capture in terms of acquaintance with the wine *from a particular standpoint*. (2) has the particularist predict that P1 = P2. But P1 and P2 are constitutively different according to particularism, for they involve different standpoints; therefore the particularist rejects the identity. Thus the particularist rejects the phenomenal similarity. Thus, (2) is false.

It seems to us then that the argument from the Wine Case that Ganson and Mehta present fails for a similar reason to the argument we considered in our previous paper.

### 3. Imagination

Whereas Ganson and Mehta's first objection accused the phenomenal particularist of predicting similarities where there are none, their second accuses the particularist of predicting difference where there is a similarity. We can call this the *Ideal Imaginer Case*. It involves a pair of experiences, (B1) a visual imagining of a snow-covered tree, as undertaken by 'an ideal

imagine, capable of picturing a scene with perfect clarity and stability' (p.4), and (B2) a visual perception of a snow-covered tree. These experiences, they hold, have 'at least some overlap in phenomenal character' (p.4).

The target here is clean phenomenal particularism, the view on which 'the phenomenal character of any experience displaying particularity (like the subject's experience when she sees the tree) is composed wholly of particulars, while any experience not displaying particularity (like the subject's experience when she visually imagines the tree) is composed wholly of non-particulars' (p.5). According to Ganson and Mehta, 'clean phenomenal particularism cannot accommodate the similarity in phenomenal character across the two experiences of the ideal imagine, since particulars are not identical or relevantly similar to non-particulars' (p.5)

We can represent this challenge as follows:

1. B1 and B2 are phenomenally similar.
2. Clean phenomenal particularism predicts that B1 and B2 have no phenomenal similarities.

Therefore

3. Clean phenomenal particularism is false.

What notion of phenomenal similarity is being invoked in this argument?  
Let's begin with (P-Similarity)

(P-Similarity) Experiences X and Y are phenomenally similar when there is an aspect of the phenomenal character of X, X\*, and an aspect of the phenomenal character of Y, Y\*, such that what its like to undergo X insofar as it has X\* is the same as what its like to undergo Y insofar as it has Y\*.

When phenomenal similarity is understood in this way, the second premise looks true. For B1 and B2 have no character-parts in common. And since the phenomenal character of B2 is constituted by its p-character-parts and the standpoint from which they are observed, any aspect of the phenomenal character of B2 will be determined by some

subset of those p-character parts and the standpoint from which they are observed. But since B1 has none of the same character-parts as B2, there is no aspect of B2, B2\*, such that what it is like to undergo B2 insofar as it has B2\* is identical to any aspect of B1.

But, on this reading of phenomenal similarity, should we accept premise (1)? One might take it to be obvious on the basis of introspection that B1 and B2 are phenomenally similar. As Ganson and Mehta note, we are sceptical about the move from the fact that two experiences introspectively appear similar to the claim that they are actually phenomenally similar (p. 6). But we needn't invoke such skepticism here. The claim that B1 and B2 are phenomenally similar is not made on the basis of introspection – since, by hypothesis, B1 is undergone by an ideal imaginer, one 'whose imaginative experiences are as vivid, stable, and forceful as her genuine perceptual experiences' (Mehta 2014, p.316). And we do not have an ideal imaginer at hand to provide introspective testimony for the truth of premise (1).

Is it obvious that B1 and B2 are phenomenally similar, in the sense of phenomenal similarity set out by (P-Similarity)? If the intuitive similarity of imaginative and perceptual experiences must be accounted for in terms of shared phenomenal properties, then premise (1) looks to be true. But it isn't mandatory to explain the intuitive similarity of imaginative and perceptual experiences in this way. Indeed, those phenomenal particularists who have discussed imaginative experiences have explained the similarity of imaginings and perceptual experiences *not* in terms of shared phenomenal properties but in terms of a representational connection between the imaginative and perceptual experience (Martin 2001, 2002, Soteriou 2013, ch.7<sup>1</sup>): as Martin puts it, 'We should not think of experience, imagery... as being phenomenologically the same not in terms of literally sharing experiential properties, but in virtue of a representation or intentional connection between them – imagery is experientially the same as perception through being the representation of such a perceptually experiential event' (2001, p.270). If this way of explaining the similarity of imaginative and perceptual experiences is endorsed, there is no reason to take premise (1) to be true, on the reading of phenomenal similarity set out in (P-Similarity).

<sup>1</sup> Though note that neither Martin nor Soteriou are committed to *clean* phenomenal particularism.

What are the grounds for thinking of the similarity between imaginative and perceptual experiences in this way? Martin sets out a number of considerations. Let us mention one. Many people are attracted to the view that the feeling of a bodily sensation – say, an itch in one’s foot – suffices for the existence of a bodily sensation. And the imagining of a bodily sensation clearly does not suffice for the existence of a bodily sensation. But if we capture the intuitive similarity between imaginative and perceptual experiences in terms of shared phenomenal properties, then we seem forced to hold that itchiness is present in both cases (Martin 2002, p.406). We don’t pretend that this consideration is decisive. All that matters, for current purposes, is that premise (1) is clearly contestable when understood along the lines of (P-Similarity), and, indeed, has been contested by some who endorse forms of phenomenal particularism.

Is there another reading of premise (1) on which it is more plausible? When Ganson and Mehta explain why clean phenomenal particularism predicts that B1 and B2 have no phenomenal similarities, they write that it cannot do so because ‘particulars are not identical or relevantly similar to non-particulars’ (p.5). This suggests an alternative conception of phenomenal similarity:

(RP-Similarity) Experiences X and Y are phenomenally similar when they exhibit some resemblance in what its like to undergo them; that is, when there is an aspect of the phenomenal character of X, X\*, and an aspect of the phenomenal character of Y, Y\*, such that what its like to undergo X insofar as it has X\* (relevantly resembles) what its like to undergo Y insofar as it has Y\*.

On this understanding of phenomenal similarity, (1) strikes us as true. There is something relevantly similar about imagining a snow-covered tree and perceiving a snow-covered tree. But must the clean phenomenal particularist think otherwise? On this reading of phenomenal similarity, the second premise is to be understood as the claim that what its like to undergo B1 does not (relevantly) resemble what it is like to undergo B2. Ganson and Mehta take this to be true because the character of B1 is constituted wholly by particulars, the character of B2 is constituted wholly of non-particulars, and particulars do not relevantly resemble non-particulars. If those claims are true, there is reason to think that premise (2) is true on the (RP-Similarity) reading of phenomenal similarity and Ganson and Mehta’s argument goes through.

But we can resist this argument by rejecting the assumption that particulars do not relevantly resemble non-particulars. Within the domain of particulars, individual particulars of radically different ontological kinds can resemble one another: wax lemons resemble real lemons; holograms resemble solids. And such resemblances are part of what grounds the resemblances between the characters of an *experience* of a real lemon (solid) and *experience* of a wax lemon (hologram). That is, within the domain of particulars, things of radically different kinds can resemble one another in ways that are relevant to experiential resemblance. So why assume that things as radically different as particulars and non-particulars can't resemble one another in the relevant way? We see no reason to make this assumption; indeed, one might even take the intuitive similarity between B1 and B2 to motivate the thought that particulars and non-particulars can resemble one another.

The problem here is finding a reading of phenomenal similarity on which both premises are true. When understood on the lines of (P-Similarity), the second premise of Ganson and Mehta's argument is true, but the first can be rejected; when understood along the lines of (RP-Similarity), the first premise is true, but the second can be rejected. Either way, the argument relies on claims that the phenomenal particularist will reject.

#### 4. Conclusion

Our original defence of phenomenal particularism aimed to show why the phenomenal particularist need not be troubled by the objections raised in Mehta (2014). Ganson and Mehta's reply helpfully clarifies the nature of Mehta's original objections, but we have tried to set out why we remain unmoved. Once one draws on the full resources of phenomenal particularism, including, for example, the standpoint conditions invoked in Campbell (2009), and the account of imaginative experience set out by Martin (2001, 2002), Ganson and Mehta's specific objections can be opposed.

But as Ganson and Mehta note at the end of their reply, none of this is to find fault with Mehta's form of phenomenal generalism. And they take it that Mehta's version of phenomenal generalism 'explains the motivating data *just as well* as phenomenal particularism... The phenomenal particularist thus not only exposes herself to serious objections, but does so for naught' (p.10). We have tried to show why the phenomenal

particularist is not exposed to serious objection. But taking that as given, this would still leave phenomenal particularism and Mehta's form of phenomenal generalism on a par. How should we proceed if this were the case?

Answering this question takes us into deep waters concerning the correct methodology for deciding between theories of perceptual experience. But it is worth noting that one influential form of phenomenal particularism – the naïve realism set out and defended by M.G.F. Martin – takes phenomenal particularism to be 'the best articulation of how our experiences strike us as being to introspective reflection on them' (2004, p.42). Someone who takes this line of thought seriously is liable to think that even if Mehta's phenomenal generalism could explain the motivating data just as well as phenomenal particularism – a claim on which we take no stand here – its revisionary character alone would count against endorsing it. J. M. Hinton's (1967, 1973) and John McDowell's (1982, pp.385-394 cf. de Gaynesford 2004, pp.4-9) motivations of phenomenal particularism take similar form. Ganson and Mehta ask why one should pay out the nose for an explanation of the particularity of experience when you can get it on the cheap. The answer is that in philosophy, as so often in life, you get what you pay for.

## References

Campbell, John. (2009). "Consciousness and Reference". In: *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind* Ed. by Brian P. McLaughlin, Ansgar Beckermann, and Sven Walter. Oxford University Press, pp. 648–662.

Ganson, Todd & Mehta, Neil. (forthcoming), "On the Generality of Experience: A Reply to French and Gomes", *Philosophical Studies*.

Gomes, Anil & French, Craig. (2016). "On the Particularity of Experience." *Philosophical Studies*, 173 (2):451-460.

Hinton, J.M. (1967) "Visual Experiences", *Mind*, 76(April): 217–227.

Hinton, J.M. (1973) *Experiences: An Inquiry into Some Ambiguities*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

de Gaynesford, M. (2004) John McDowell, Cambridge: Polity.

Martin, Michael G. F. (2001). “Out of the Past: Episodic Recall as Retained Acquaintance”. In: *Time and Memory* Ed. by Christoph Hoerl, and Teresa McCormack. Oxford University Press, pp. 257–284.

Martin, Michael G. F. (2002). “The Transparency of Experience”. In: *Mind and Language* 17, pp. 376–425.

Martin, Michael G. F. (2004) “The Limits of Self-Awareness”. In: *Philosophical Studies* 120, pp. 37–89.

McDowell, J. (1982) “Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge”. Reprinted in his *Meaning, Knowledge and Reality*, London: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Mehta, Neil (2014). “The Limited Role of Particulars in Phenomenal Experience”. In: *Journal of Philosophy* Volume CXI, pp. 311–331

Soteriou, Matthew (2013). *The Mind's Construction: The Ontology of Mind and Mental Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.