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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/phenomenology/997>

ISSN: 2239-4028

Publisher

Rosenberg & Sellier

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2022

Number of pages: 150-159

ISSN: 2280-7853

Electronic reference

Daniel S. H. Kim, "Naïve Realism and Minimal Self", *Phenomenology and Mind* [Online], 22 | 2022, Online since 01 August 2022, connection on 30 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/phenomenology/997>



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NAÏVE REALISM AND MINIMAL SELF

abstract

This paper defends the idea that phenomenological approaches to self-consciousness can enrich the current analytic philosophy of perception, by showing how phenomenological discussions of minimal self-consciousness can enhance our understanding of the phenomenology of conscious perceptual experiences. As a case study, I investigate the nature of the relationship between naïve realism, a contemporary Anglophone theory of perception, and experiential minimalism (or, the ‘minimal self view’), a pre-reflective model of self-consciousness originated in the Phenomenological tradition. I argue that naïve realism is not only compatible with, but can be supplemented with experiential minimalism in a novel way. The suggestion is that there are reasons to combine naïve realism and experiential minimalism. My focus here will be on drawing a connection between the notion of minimal self and two core theoretical commitments of naïve realism, relationalism and transparency.

keywords

Naïve realism; Minimal self; Self-consciousness; Subjectivity; Phenomenology

0. Introduction Despite much recent interest in the phenomenological approaches to self-consciousness, the notion of minimal self(-consciousness) has not yet found its way to the analytic philosophy of perception in a substantive way. This paper draws a connection between the notion of minimal self and the naïve realist theory of perception. On the face of it, it might seem surprising to combine naïve realism, a prominent contemporary Anglophone theory of perception, and experiential minimalism (or, the ‘minimal self’ view), a pre-reflective model of self-consciousness that originated in the Phenomenological tradition. However, I will argue that combining naïve realism and experiential minimalism is explanatorily virtuous in that this enables the naïve realist to develop a more adequate account of the ‘subjective’ dimension of perceptual phenomenology. The central idea is that, given the ‘object-directed’ nature of their account, naïve realist theories of perception have paid inadequate attention to the ‘subject’ side of the relation that is constitutive of perception, and that this theoretical gap in naïve realism (that is, an account of the contribution made by the subject relatum to the overall phenomenology) can be fruitfully filled by appeal to the notion of minimal self drawn from recent phenomenological analysis.

In what follows, I first clarify what naïve realism amounts to and specify two core theoretical commitments of naïve realism, relationalism (Section 1) and transparency (Section 2). I then go on to characterize minimal self as a ‘structural’ feature of phenomenal consciousness (Section 3), and demonstrate that the minimal self can supplement the philosophical framework of naïve realism in a novel, substantive way – by giving weight to the naïve realist’s account of perceptual acquaintance and transparency (Section 4). The suggestion is that, when explaining the nature of phenomenal consciousness, naïve realism and minimal self are natural allies.

1. Naïve Realism and Relationalism Naïve realism is the view that veridical perception involves a subject’s direct sensory awareness of some external-worldly entities. When explaining the ‘phenomenal’ (what it’s like) character of experience, naïve realists highlight the constitutive role of an ‘acquaintance’ relation which obtains between the subject and some mind-independent entities. The phenomenal character of my visual experience of the apple on my desk is (at least in part) constitutively dependent on and thus determined by the direct presentation of that red apple and its properties (e.g., redness, round-shapedness) that I am acquainted with.

There is a broad consensus among most mainstream advocates of naïve realism that naïve

realism entails relationalism.^{1,2} Relationalism is the view that perceptual experiences are ‘relational’ in the sense that the obtaining of a perceptually conscious state requires the obtaining of a relation of acquaintance between subjects and some mind-independent entities which cannot be specified independently of that relation. Naïve realists who are relationalists (henceforth naïve realists) are committed to three core claims about the relation of ‘perceptual acquaintance’: First, it is constitutive of the *phenomenology* of every veridical perceptual experience. This is a metaphysical thesis about the contribution made to the overall phenomenology of experience by the acquaintance relation. Second, it is essentially *non-representational* and thus cannot be explained in terms of contents of representational or intentional states. This gives naïve realists reason to resist strong reductive representationalism (Dretske, 2003; Tye 1995; 2003). Third, it obtains between subjects and some *mind-independent* entities. This expresses the naïve realist’s externalist tendency in that the relevant acquaintance relation obtains between a subject and her external-worldly surroundings – not some mind-dependent sense data, for example. This also indicates that the relevant acquaintance relation only obtains in veridical cases and not in non-veridical experiences such as total hallucinations. Naïve realists hold that this non-representational relation of direct awareness to worldly aspects is what is fundamental to every (veridical) perceptual experience and its phenomenology.

There are some important implications of the naïve realist’s commitment to relationalism. Firstly, the distinctive explanatory role assigned to the acquaintance relation and the mind-independent entities makes clear how naïve realism contrasts with sense-datum theories, the views that experiences involve a relation of acquaintance with some mind-dependent sense-data. It also gives rise to the tension between naïve realism and the mainstream accounts of phenomenal consciousness that are associated with reductive representationalism. Such representationalists stress a tight connection between phenomenal character and representational content, and therein neglect the explanatory role assigned to the ‘non-representational’, acquaintance relation. Naïve realists, by contrast, hold that the phenomenal character of experience is inexplicable in terms of the content of representational states or mind-dependent sense-data alone. For it must be explained ‘at least in part’ in terms of the obtaining of a unique, *sui generis* relation of acquaintance between the subject and her mind-independent surroundings.

The key motivation behind my suggestion to draw a connection between phenomenological discussions of minimal self-consciousness and naïve realism is the fact that naïve realism, as it currently stands, seems to lack resources to fully explain the role of subjectivity in characterization of perceptual phenomenology. The difficulty is that, given their emphasis on the constitutive and explanatory role assigned to the mind-independent entities, naïve realists tend to overlook the contribution made by the subject *relatum* to the overall phenomenology. Strong reductive representationalists who are largely driven by the naturalistic externalist tendency face a similar problem.³ This will become more apparent as we consider the

1 Proponents of the consensus include Brewer (2006), Campbell (2002), Martin (2002; 2004), and Soteriou (2013).

2 Some might reject the consensus and argue otherwise. Steenhagen (2019), for example, offers a non-relationalist interpretation of naïve realism. He views that standard perceptions can belong to the same fundamental kind as mere appearances that do not involve a relation between a subject of experience and an object of experience. However, this way of characterizing naïve realism without a commitment to relationalism overlooks what seems to be a key component of perceptual experience, namely the contribution made by the presence of a perceiving subject in characterization of perceptual phenomenology.

3 In response, representationalists often take ‘modes of presentation’ as a built-in feature of representational content of experience (in a quasi-Fregean sense) (Crane, 2009), meaning that the subject’s experiences can have different contents when they represent their objects in different ways or manners.

second core theoretical commitment of naïve realism concerning the phenomenology of transparency.

2. Naïve Realism and Transparency

Naïve realists are committed to explaining the so-called transparency intuition. It is the idea that perceptual experiences are ‘transparent’ or ‘diaphanous’ in the sense that, when having a perceptual experience of some external objects, we normally ‘see right through’ the experience and do not notice that we are having a perceptual experience. That is to say, the properties we are aware of in perception are attributed to the objects perceived only and not to the perceptual experience itself. When I see the red apple on my desk and try attending to the intrinsic features of my own visual experience of that apple, the only features I end up finding are features of the presented apple (e.g., its redness, round-shapedness, etc.). According to the standard ‘strong’ interpretation of transparency, when one tries to reflectively attend to the nature of one’s own experiences through introspection, one does *not* become aware of anything other than the external objects and the properties of those objects. The strong transparency thesis undermines the very possibility of becoming aware of any properties of the experiences themselves, other than the properties of the objects. Contemporary advocates of the strong interpretation, including strong representationalists like Tye (1993; 2003) and Dretske (2003), contend that in veridical perception, the only properties we become aware of are properties that are attributed to the perceived objects, and in this sense, experience has no other properties (like qualia) that pose problems for materialism.⁴ For naïve realists, there is reason to resist the strong transparency thesis as it suggests that introspection only reveals one of the *relata*, namely some mind-independent objects and properties. Specifically, strong transparency commits them to endorse an austere form of phenomenal externalism, the view that perceptual phenomenology is entirely determined by the worldly entities in the environment.

The strong transparency thesis is not the only option available for naïve realists, however. They can instead endorse a ‘weaker’ interpretation of transparency, according to which introspection *can* reveal the properties of the experience itself ‘when attending to the objects and properties of the world’. It is arguable that this is much closer to the original view of G.E. Moore who introduced the idea of the transparency of experience (Martin, 2002). As he wrote, when we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue: the other element is as if it were diaphanous [...] Yet it *can* be distinguished if we look attentively enough, and if we know that there is something to look for (Moore, 1993, p. 41).

After all, Moore himself was sympathetic to the idea that we *can* become aware of some properties of our own experiences with ‘effort and attention’. According to the weak interpretation, the transparency claim is simply that when one reflects on one’s own experience, one’s attention invariably points to the objects and properties that are experienced. In this way, one can be neutral on the possibility of being aware of some ‘non-diaphanous’ properties of experience that are possessed by one’s own experience, not by the objects of experience.

Consider the phenomenology of blurry vision, for example. When I remove my glasses, things appear very different, blurred and hazy. Seeing things *blurribly* is not the same as seeing things *as fuzzy* (e.g., seeing a low-resolution screen). I can see the fuzzy screen in a perfectly sharp, non-blurry way – say, with my glasses on. Neither is it the same as seeing things *to be* blurry

⁴ Dretske (2003) endorses a radical version of transparency, the view that we cannot introspect anything about a perceptual experience, if “introspect” has its usual meaning of internally ‘attending’ to the experience.

in that the latter expresses how things really are or how one takes the world to be, rather than saying how things *look* or are in experience. In this sense, blurriness seems to be a phenomenological feature of the visual experience itself, and not a feature of what my visual experience is an experience of, and so not something that is entirely determined by what my experience presents to be the case.⁵

The spatial limitation of visual field is another example of an aspect of the phenomenal character of an ordinary visual experience that is not entirely determined by some worldly entities but amounts to “the way in which one’s visual awareness of those objects and events seems to be structured” (Soteriou, 2013, p. 117). When having a visual experience, there is a sense that what I see is only a subregion (part) of a larger space (whole) and a sense that there is more to see if my spatial viewpoint is altered. As Richardson puts it, “in vision having this feature [i.e., the boundaries of visuo-spatial field], it seems to me as if I, am limited, sensorily” (2010, p. 239). Such a ‘limitation’ aspect of a visual experience is not an aspect of some thing one is sensing like the frame of painting. Rather, it accounts for one’s own sensory limitations that one becomes aware of in having the visual experience. The idea is that the phenomenal character of an ordinary visual experience is not solely determined by the spatially organized aspects of the world that one becomes aware of, but also determined, in part, by the way my awareness is spatially structured and viewpointed (and thus limited). The point here is that there’s more to experience (and its phenomenology) than what simply derives from the objects of experience, and that such non-diaphanous aspects of experience (e.g., blurriness, spatial limitation of visual field) are worthy of attention and explanation.

One of the main advantages of the weak transparency thesis is that it leaves room for the possibility of phenomenal variations without variations in the presented object as it is neutral on the possibility of becoming aware of such ‘non-diaphanous’ aspects of experience that do not simply derive from the external-worldly object. This makes room for the possibility that both features of the perceived object *and* features of the perceiving subject play a role in determining phenomenal character (Logue, 2012).

When accounting for the ‘non-diaphanous’ aspects of experience and the idea of ‘a phenomenal difference without a difference in the presented object’, naïve realists typically appeal either to (a) variations in the subject relatum to explain variations in perceptual phenomenology without variations in the object (Logue, 2012), or to (b) some third relatum which embodies various conditions of possibility for the occurrence of perceptual experiences, such as sensory modalities (Soteriou, 2013), or a ‘viewpoint’ (Martin, 1998). They often speak of some ‘structural’ features of experience (French, 2014; Martin, 1992; Richardson, 2010; Soteriou, 2013). These are features of the phenomenal character of experience that are a matter not of the worldly entities one is aware of when having a perceptual experience (i.e., the ‘what’ of experience), but, rather, of the way or manner in which one is acquainted with those things in the environment (i.e., the ‘how’ of experience). The visuo-spatial field, for example, is a structural feature of ordinary visual experience in the sense that it accounts for the *common* manner in which I am visually aware of the scenes before me (e.g., seeing a red apple in front of me with my left eye closed, and seeing a yellow banana in the kitchen with my right eye closed). This means that whatever differences there are between these experiences, the phenomenal difference between them is not entirely constituted by the differences in the objects and scenes before me, but needs to be accounted for, in part, in terms of the difference in the sensory limitations of my visuo-spatial field.

My upshot in the following is to demonstrate how the naïve realist’s account of the ‘subjective’

5 For discussion of blurriness as a subjective contribution (within the naïve realist framework), see French (2014).

and ‘non-diaphanous’ aspects of perceptual phenomenology can be fruitfully informed by drawing from resources outside analytic philosophy of perception, namely phenomenological discussions of minimal self-consciousness. I will argue that the notion of minimal self, construed as a ‘structural’ feature of phenomenal consciousness (Section 3), refers to a subjective, non-diaphanous element of experience that is previously undiscussed by naïve realists. The aim is to show that phenomenological discussions of minimal self-consciousness can supplement the naïve realist framework in a novel way – by giving substance to the naïve realist’s account of perceptual acquaintance and weak transparency (Section 4).

3. Minimal Self and Phenomenal Consciousness

The issue of reflexivity or pre-reflective self-awareness is a recurring theme in the classical phenomenological tradition (Husserl, 1959; Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Sartre, 1967) as well as in the mainstream literature on phenomenological psychopathology e.g., the ipseity-disturbance model of schizophrenia (Sass & Parnas, 2006). Experiential minimalism is the view that there exists a ‘pre-reflective’ or ‘reflexive’ dimension of selfhood that pervades our human mental life. The notion of minimal self refers to the very first-personal character or perspectivalness of our experiential life, accommodating the phenomenological fact that every conscious experience is given to me as *my* experience or *for me*. The minimalist claims that this most basic, experiential dimension of selfhood or ‘for-me-ness’ (Zahavi, 2014) is still largely overlooked in current accounts of phenomenal consciousness.

Experiential minimalism comprises of two core claims: that minimal self is a universal, ‘structural’ feature of consciousness that is inherent in all forms of conscious experience, and that it is partly constitutive of phenomenal consciousness. To rephrase, the claim is that phenomenal consciousness entails a minimal self in the sense that the phenomenology of every conscious experience is at least in part constitutively dependent on a minimal self-consciousness. Note that the minimal self does not refer to some worldly entities, but to the very first-personal givenness or subjective ‘mode’ of experience. When having a visual experience of a red apple, I become aware of not only some sensible features like redness, round-shapedness and so on, but also the fact that the relevant visual experience of the red apple is given to me as ‘mine’ and ‘for me’. As Zahavi puts it, [T]he for-me-ness or mineness in question [that is, minimal self] is not a quality like scarlet, sour, or soft. It doesn’t refer to a specific experiential ‘content’, to a specific *what*, nor does it refer to the diachronic or synchronic sum of such content, or to some other relation that might obtain between the contents in question. Rather, it refers to the distinct givenness or *how* of experience (Zahavi, 2010, p. 59).

The thought behind this mode-content distinction Zahavi puts in place is that there exists a formal, structural dimension of consciousness that is neither reducible to nor explainable in terms of some *object* or object-involving ‘content’ of experience, but is nevertheless constitutive of phenomenal consciousness as the subjective ‘mode’ of givenness. In other words, the phenomenal nature of consciousness is constitutively dependent not solely on some external-worldly entities that constitute the ever-changing ‘content’ of experience, but also on the way the subject’s experiences are pre-reflectively given to her as her own (i.e., the invariant, universal subjectiveness or the first-personal ‘mode’ of experience). Minimal self can be characterized as a necessary ‘structural’ feature of phenomenal consciousness in this sense. This is comparable to the ways in which naïve realists typically explain the specific *manner* in which we are perceptually acquainted with things in our environment in terms of some ‘structural’ properties of experience such as the visuo-spatial field (French, 2014; Martin, 1992; Richardson, 2010; Soteriou, 2013).

I will now demonstrate how the minimal self can give weight to the naïve realist’s account of perceptual acquaintance and weak transparency.

The notion of minimal self describes the way that a conscious experience is given to the subject whose experiential limitations shape the perspectivalness of the relevant experience. It accounts for the basic phenomenological fact that I enjoy a unique, privileged access to my own experiential life that is in principle unavailable to experiences of others and vice versa. In this sense, the minimal self can be characterized in ‘relational’ terms, as a unique, non-representational relation of ‘self-acquaintance’ that obtains between the conscious subject and her own experiential life.

Recall that naïve realism is committed to three core claims about the relation of ‘perceptual acquaintance’:

- (a) that it is constitutive of the *phenomenology* of conscious sensory experience,
- (b) that it is *non-representational*, and
- (c) that it obtains between the subject and some *mind-independent* entities.

In comparison, experiential minimalism can be formulated as comprising of the following three claims about the relation of minimal ‘self-acquaintance’:

- (a) that it is constitutive of the *phenomenology* of every conscious experience,
- (b) that it is *non-representational* in that it is pre-reflectively given, and
- (c) that it obtains between the subject and her *own conscious life* (and her own experiential states that fall within it).

Concerning the first pair of premises, neither of them has to be seen as presenting an exhaustive account of perceptual phenomenology, and thus they are compatible with each other. The combined claim would be that the phenomenal character of a perceptual experience is not only constitutively dependent on the obtaining of a relation of perceptual acquaintance but also on the obtaining of a relation of self-acquaintance. The second pair is also consistent in that their combination would simply amount to the view that both relations occupy the non-representational (pre-reflective) dimension of our conscious mental life. On the face of it, combining the third pair might seem problematic, partly because the ‘externalist’ tendency of naïve realism, expressed in its emphasis on the constitutive and explanatory role of the *mind-independent* entities to which the subject is perceptually acquainted, seems to be in tension with the apparent, ‘internalist’ characterization of the self-acquaintance relation that obtains between a conscious subject and her *own experiential life*. Note that, however, the relevant self-acquaintance relation should not be equated with the sort of acquaintance that may obtain between a conscious subject and some mind-dependent sense-data.

To resolve the tension, consider the fact that both perceptual acquaintance and self-acquaintance are ‘psychological’ relations that constitute the condition for occurrence of (veridical) perceptual experiences. An important difference is that the former is a condition for the occurrence of perceptual experiences that is distinctive of veridical perceptions of the mind-independent world, whereas the latter is a condition for the occurrence of any conscious experience (e.g., veridical and non-veridical perceiving, as well as imagining, remembering, desiring, etc.). The key thought here is that: were we not subjects whose self-acquaintance is pervasive and universal, we would not be perceptually acquainted with things in the environment. This is not merely to say that we could not appropriate an experience as our own (*as such*), but rather to say that, in absence of self-acquaintance, there would not be any phenomenally conscious mental state at all. In other words, the relation of perceptual acquaintance is connected with the relation of self-acquaintance by the fact

4. Minimal Self, Perceptual Acquaintance and Weak Transparency

that, necessarily, if one is perceptually acquainted with some mind-independent entities in the environment (e.g., seeing a flying bird), this implies that one is also self-acquainted with one's own experiential life (in the sense that one is in a position to be *self-aware* that it is one who is having this particular visual experience). The relation of perceptual acquaintance is dependent on the self-acquaintance relation in this crucial sense. To that extent, the tension between the naïve realist's externalist tendency and the seemingly internalist characterization of the self-acquaintance relation can be resolved.

One important implication of combining perceptual acquaintance and self-acquaintance is that the phenomenology of conscious perceptual experience is constitutively dependent not only on some external-worldly objects and properties in the surrounding *and* the way or manner in which the subject is perceptually acquainted with such mind-independent entities (e.g., different sense modalities, say, in seeing, hearing and touching, and environmental factors including lighting and geometrical standpoint), but *also* on the *sui generis* way or manner in which she is self-acquainted with her own conscious experiential life (e.g., in seeing, remembering, imagining, anticipating, etc.). In this way, experiential minimalism enriches the naïve realist framework by shedding light on the neglected role of the subject's 'self-acquaintance' in characterization of perceptual phenomenology.⁶

This brings us back to the issue concerning how the naïve realist can account for the 'weak' transparency in the way that permits her to accommodate some 'non-diaphanous' aspects of perceptual phenomenology. The claim is that naïve realism, on its own, lacks resources to fully accommodate such 'negative' aspects of experience, and thus needs to be supplemented. As I see it, experiential minimalism can enrich the naïve realist's weak reading of transparency, insofar as the minimal self is construed as one such 'non-diaphanous' feature of perceptual phenomenology. First, the minimal self can be construed as a 'non-diaphanous' feature of experience insofar as it does not simply derive from the perceived, external-worldly objects. It is 'non-object-involving'. The minimalist holds that every conscious experience involves the most basic, primitive dimension of selfhood that is *not* grounded on or constituted by the objects of experience (i.e., some worldly entities) in the way that the qualitative or sensory aspects of perceptual phenomenology are. The minimal self does not refer to a feature of some mind-independent entities, but to a 'structural' feature of the experience itself which accounts for the way or manner in which the external-worldly objects are first-personally given to the subject. Second, the minimal self can be construed as a 'non-diaphanous' feature in that it occupies the 'pre-reflective' dimension of experience. It is non-diaphanous in the sense that it is beyond the scope of reflective self-awareness of experience *as such*. Experiential minimalism is a pre-reflective model of self-consciousness, according to which self-consciousness obtains not only when we explicitly and deliberately attend to our own experiential states through reflection, but whenever we implicitly and pre-reflectively, live-through an experience as a subject. This pre-reflective form of self-awareness amounts to a primordial form of self-directedness

6 One might worry that the inclusion of a 'self-acquaintance' condition makes perceptual experience more *demanding* in the sense that it requires perceivers to also have self-awareness, and that this runs the risk of excluding creatures with limited cognitive skills, such as human infants and non-human animals. A typical minimalist response would be that minimal self is so fundamental and basic (and thus *undemanding*) that it can be attributed to all creatures who possess phenomenal consciousness, including human infants and various non-human animals. Alternatively, one can dispute the idea that infants have a self at all (Kagan, 1998, p. 138). Part of the issue here concerns the question of whether the for-me-ness or pre-reflective self-awareness of human adults is *qualitatively* different from the for-me-ness or pre-reflective self-awareness of infants and non-human animals. A developmental story needs to be told with regards to the ontogenetic nature of selfhood and the relation between the emergence of pre-linguistic self and the acquisition of higher-order representational capacities. This would be a topic for another occasion. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for prompting me to clarify this point.

upon which other more advanced, reflective forms of self-awareness (which may require further conceptual, linguistic capacities) are grounded. Acknowledging such a pre-reflective dimension of experience gives us a more phenomenologically-sensitive picture of perception which respects the role of the subject in characterization of perceptual phenomenology. For naïve realists, this also gives reason to resist strong phenomenal externalism as it simply overlooks this pre-reflective dimension of phenomenal consciousness. To this extent, experiential minimalism can supplement the naïve realist's weak reading of transparency, by giving substance to her account of the 'non-diaphanous' properties of experience as (i) non-object-involving and (ii) pre-reflectively given.

The objective has been to legitimize the claim that the notion of minimal self can enrich the philosophical framework of naïve realism by drawing a connection between minimal self and two core theoretical commitments of naïve realism. As shown, the minimal self is not only compatible with, but can substantiate the naïve realist's account of perceptual acquaintance and weak transparency in a novel way. In this sense, there are reasons to combine naïve realism, a theory of 'outer' sensory awareness of the world, and experiential minimalism, a theory of 'inner' reflexive self-awareness of one's own experiential life.

Let me conclude with some remarks on the potential benefits of combining naïve realism and experiential minimalism: First, it resolves the tension between the naïve realist's emphasis on the role assigned to external-worldly entities and the fact that many naïve realist theories tend to resist austere phenomenal externalism. Amalgamating naïve realism and experiential minimalism illuminates the fact that there is a subjective ('for-me') dimension of phenomenal consciousness, while simultaneously accommodating the fact that the subject is perceptually acquainted with some mind-independent entities.

Second, supplementing naïve realism with the minimal self accommodates the sense in which veridical perceptions and hallucinations can be both similar and different, phenomenologically speaking. They can be phenomenally similar in the sense that a subject of perception and a subject of hallucination can share the same phenomenological fact that they enjoy a unique, *sui generis* relation of self-acquaintance with their own experiential life that is unavailable to experiences of the other, while not sharing any qualitative aspects of perceptual phenomenology.

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