

## Losing Grip on the Third Realm: Against Naive Realism for Intuitions<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Naive realism in philosophy of perception is the view that (successful) perception involves a direct relation between perceiving subjects and the world. The naive realist says that your perception of a cat on the mat is a worldly relation which is *partially constituted* by the cat and the mat; a spatio-temporal chunk of the world is *presenting* itself to you. Recently, Elijah Chudnoff and John Bengson have independently developed an extension of this view to intellectual experiences, or intuitions, for traditionally *a priori* domains. We argue that this view, which we call ‘Intuitional Naive Realism’ (INR), will not have the epistemic advantages that Chudnoff and Bengson claim that it does. In perception, but not intuition, there is a deeper explanation of *what makes it the case* that one experience is constituted by the world while another is not. Whether or not INR is true, then, it does no interesting epistemological work for traditionally *a priori* domains.

Naive realism in philosophy of perception is the view that (successful) perception involves a direct relation between perceiving subjects and the world. In contrast to intentionalist dogma, the naive realist says that when you see a cat on a mat, it isn’t that you have some representational state of a cat on a mat, and that, if you’re lucky, this state bears a reliable causal connection to some cat on some mat in the external world. Instead, the naive realist says that your perception involves a worldly relation which is partially constituted by the cat and the mat; a spatio-temporal chunk of the world is presenting itself to you (rather than being represented to you), and this presentation gives you direct acquaintance with that chunk of the world. One purported advantage of such a view is that it removes the epistemic veil between perceiving subjects and the world that other theories of perception appear to saddle us with.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This paper was a wholly joint effort. Authors are listed in alphabetical order.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion here, see Pritchard & Ranalli (Forthcoming).

There is another domain where there is an even more mysterious epistemic veil between subjects and chunks of the world: knowledge in traditionally *a priori* domains, such as mathematics, logic, and ethics. It's natural, then, to ask whether a similar move could be made to remove the veil between intuiting subjects and, for example, mathematical facts. Such a view has been developed and defended in recent years by Elijah Chudnoff and John Bengson.<sup>4</sup>

Our aim in this paper is to show that this extension of naive realism to *a priori* domains won't do the epistemic work it is purported to do. At best, it moves the bump in the epistemic rug. We will show this by considering a crucial disanalogy between *perceptual naive realism* (PNR) and what we call *intuitional naive realism* (INR). In brief, the disanalogy we point to has to do with veridical hallucinations and illusions. While proponents of PNR have a natural story of what distinguishes veridical hallucinations and illusions from successful perception, this story cannot be extended to *a priori* domains.

Our plan for the paper is as follows. In section 1, we sketch out the core features of the view we call INR, focusing especially on Bengson and Chudnoff since they are the most influential proponents of such a view. In section 2, we present our objection to INR. We then argue that the solution to the analogous problem for PNR isn't available to INR, nor are alternative paths for solving it. Ultimately, we conclude that even if any of these other paths succeed, INR is not doing any epistemic work. So there is no epistemic reason to favor INR over its intentionalist alternatives. Section 3 concludes.

## 1 Intuitional Naive Realism

Bengson's influential paper "Grasping the Third Realm" is a nice discussion not only for its sophisticated defense of what we are calling INR, but also for its work in presenting and clarifying a longstanding problem for the claim that we have knowledge of abstract objects of various sorts (mathematical facts, moral facts, property facts Platonistically-construed). As Bengson says, the deep problem here is in explaining how in the world we could bear some relation to abstract objects that could ground non-accidentally true beliefs about the nature of those entities:

*The Non-accidental Relation Question:* What relation does a thinker's mental state — her intuition — bear to an abstract fact that explains how the state can be non-accidentally correct with respect to that fact, hence able to serve as a source of knowledge of it?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bengson (2015), Chudnoff (2011, 2013a, 2013b). As far as I can tell, each developed the view somewhat independently from the other.

<sup>5</sup> Bengson (2015), p.8.

One place this question comes up is in distinguishing between successful, knowledge-enabling states and veridical hallucinations. This arises in both the perceptual and the intuition cases. Bengson gives an example of the latter kind:

[S]uppose that Ramanujan (a mathematical genius) and I (a mathematical pedestrian) *both* have the intuition that 1729 is the smallest number expressible as the sum of two (positive) cubes in two different ways, upon considering the number for the very first time. Ramanujan has this intuition because he is a brilliant mathematician, whereas I have it because I have a capricious brain lesion.<sup>6</sup>

We need an account of the relation that holds between Ramanujan and the mathematical fact but doesn't hold between the mathematical pedestrian and the fact, despite them both coming to believe the truth. Only Ramanujan has knowledge of the fact, and this is presumably because of some relation between Ramanujan and the fact that grounds the non-accidental truth of his belief.

As noted above, this question can be asked about concrete objects as well — this isn't a matter of special pleading against the proponent of *a priori* knowledge. But in the case of concrete objects, the answer is clear enough: There is a causal connection between the thinker's mental states (perceptual experiences) and concrete goings on in her perceptual environment. This causal link is a paradigmatic instance of a non-accidental relation between perceiver and perceived that can illustrate perception as a source of knowledge.<sup>7</sup> In the case of intuitions, no such causal connection is to be found. So we will need something else.

However, the causal connection story isn't the only story that gets told, even in the perceptual case. According to *perceptual naive realism* (PNR), the relation between perceiver and perceived is not fundamentally one about some chunk of the world *causing* a certain experience. Instead, perceptual experience is literally *constituted* by some chunk of the world. The motivations and attraction of this view are outside the scope of this paper, but they are many.<sup>8</sup> What is important is that PNR, just as with the classic causal/representationalist view of perceptual experience, points to a kind of non-accidental relation between subject and world which can ground knowledge. For it is clear that constitution is a metaphysical determination relation which is, in the relevant sense, non-accidental. If the (external, physical) bottle on the table in front of me is a partial constituent of my experience, there is in an important sense no gap between myself and the world to allow accidentality in.

At this point one may raise the concern that something must be wrong here — after all, while perhaps sometimes my experience of a bottle on the table bears a non-accidental

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<sup>6</sup> Bengson (2015), p.5.

<sup>7</sup> We are of course bracketing skeptical worries here for the sake of simplicity.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g. Haddock & Macpherson (2008), Brewer (2011), Logue (2012), Beck (Forthcoming).

connection to the bottle on the table, at other times I may have a subjectively indistinguishable hallucination. The standard response is to appeal to *disjunctivism*. Disjunctivism is a family of views, and as with the motivations for naive realism, the details here are not of our concern. But the rough idea is that, given that perception, in the success case, is partially constituted by a chunk of the world, hallucinations are experiences of a fundamentally different kind.<sup>9</sup> In short, then, perception essentially does bear a non-accidental relation (constitution) to the world that can ground knowledge, even if there may be other subjectively indistinguishable states that do not.

Bengson's insight is to take the PNR story and extend it to intuitions, for a view we call Intuitional Naive Realism (INR).<sup>10</sup> The structure of the view here mirrors the structure of PNR, and so doesn't appear to require any claim about a causal connection between intuitions and abstract objects. Instead, in success cases of intuition, abstract objects are *partial constituents* of the intuition in question. Let's walk through an example to see how this is supposed to work from Elijah Chudnoff (who has a similar view to Bengson's):

At some point in my life I didn't know that circles are symmetrical about their diameters. I just hadn't thought about it. Now I do know that...[T]his seems to me as certain as anything I believe. What happened? On the face of it, all I did was imagine folding some circles over some of their diameters whereupon I had an intuition that circles are symmetrical about their diameters, which intuition I took at face value.<sup>11</sup>

For Chudnoff, this imagining of an arbitrary circle, done properly, was enough to make this abstract fact about circles and their diameters part of his "intellectual awareness". In other words, the abstract properties of circularity and diagonality are partial constituents of the intuition experience in question. Thus, as with the perceptual case, there is a non-accidental connection between the intuition in question and the abstract objects it is about.

So far, we have given a gloss on the general view we will object to by way of Bengson. Chudnoff's view shares all of the above with Bengson, but differs in a few respects. First, it is important for Chudnoff that a successful (knowledge-grounding) intuition has a *presentational phenomenology*. A presentational phenomenology, for Chudnoff, is when a particular mental state with *p* as its content is such that it "makes it seem to you as if this experience makes you aware of a truthmaker for *p*".<sup>12</sup> In a good case, an intuition in fact does make you aware of a truthmaker for *p*, but the "seems to you" here is important; for Chudnoff, presentational phenomenology is not factive. (He allows for hallucinations with presentational phenomenology, for example.)

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<sup>9</sup> Illusions, in which one successfully perceives an object but misperceives some of its properties, are a trickier case for disjunctivists, but again are outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>10</sup> Bengson (2015) calls this *Naive Realism about Intuition*.

<sup>11</sup> Chudnoff (2013a), p. 205.

<sup>12</sup> Chudnoff (2013a), 37.

Second, for Chudnoff, intuitions are constituted out of other mental states (imaginings and thoughts). This difference between Bengson and Chudnoff is not itself important for our purposes, but it is related to a third difference that may seem to be. To understand this third difference, let's first look at Chudnoff's canonical statement of his account:

Formal Naïve Realism: If S is intuitively aware of an abstract object *o* by having intuition experience *e*, then *e* depends on *o*, in that: in accordance with the essence of *e*, *o* is part of the principle of unity that *e*'s (material) parts instantiate and thereby determines *e*'s phenomenal character.<sup>13</sup>

The key here is that Chudnoff has given us a bit more detail about what it takes for an intuition to involve awareness of (and thus partial constitution by) an abstract object. When awareness of an abstract object is present, the experience is partly determined by a "principle of unity", of which the abstract object, *o*, is a part. So what exactly is a "principle of unity"? The notion comes from Mark Johnston. A principle of unity, for Johnston, is a feature of the *structure* of a set of certain parts, such that the structure is necessary for that set to compose the thing that it is. For example, a pile of bicycle parts is not a bicycle, even if all of the necessary parts are there. We also need, added to this, for the parts to be put together in a certain way.<sup>14</sup> So too, for Chudnoff, our imaginings and thoughts must be put together in a certain way for them to constitute awareness of an abstract object or proposition. The principle doing this work of 'putting together' is none other than the abstract object or proposition itself. So for Chudnoff, only when the abstract object is playing a determining (partially constituting) role as a principle of unity is an intuition going to put us in a position for a priori knowledge.

Returning to Bengson's Ramanujan case, we can see how INR can distinguish between Ramanujan's intuition and the mathematical pedestrian's intuition. Ramanujan's intuition is partially constituted by the mathematical fact he is intuiting, while the pedestrian's intuition is not — it is merely a veridical intellectual hallucination. So it looks as though INR can provide an answer to *The Non-Accidental Relation Question* in terms of constitution, just as in the case of PNR.

## 2 The Disanalogy Between Intuitions and Perceptions

The main problem with INR, as we see it, is this: while INR does provide an answer to *The Non-accidental Relation Question*, this answer moves the bump in the epistemic rug rather than getting rid of it. This is because the solution given by INR raises another important epistemic question that is not very far-off from our original question, and INR does not have the resources to answer it. Even more severely, INR enjoys plausibility mainly by

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<sup>13</sup> Chudnoff (2013a), 223.

<sup>14</sup> Johnston (2004).

appeal to its perceptual counterpart, PNR. However, the same question applied to PNR can be answered, and so the analogy breaks down, leaving INR unmotivated.

To see what closely-related question we have in mind, we need to return to the case of the mathematical pedestrian discussed above. Just like in the case of perceptual experiences, one can have an intellectual experience that matches the facts but only accidentally so, and so counts not as a successful intuition but rather as a veridical intellectual hallucination. Distinguishing between successful intuition and veridical intellectual hallucination, recall, is part of the motivation for posing and answering *The Non-accidental Relation Question*.

Since INR answers *The Non-accidental Relation Question*, it also tells us what distinguishes a successful intuition that  $p$  from a veridical intellectual hallucination that  $p$ : namely, that the former, but not the latter, is constituted by the fact that  $p$ . But what INR doesn't tell us is what makes it the case that one intellectual experience is constituted by the fact that  $p$  and another is not. Call this *The Non-Arbitrary Constitution Question*:

*The Non-Arbitrary Constitution Question*: What makes it the case that some intellectual experiences are constituted by the facts, while others are not?<sup>15</sup>

Maybe sometimes constitution is a matter of brute fact: it just is the case that the numbers 1, 2, 3 constitute the set  $\{1, 2, 3\}$ , and there's not much more one can ask or say about this fact. We don't deny that this occurs. However, there are cases in which we can sensibly ask why some constitution occurs. This happens when we can distinguish between a successful case, where the constituents indeed constitute the relevant entity, and an unsuccessful case, where these constituents are in some sense 'present' but they don't thus constitute the relevant entities. Think back to Johnston's case of a bicycle being constituted by its parts. Presumably, there's some story to be told about why the bicycle is constituted by these parts in this case, but wouldn't be if the same parts were scattered around the world, rather than located in one place.<sup>16</sup>

The constitution of intuitions falls into the latter category: it seems like there must be some explanation of why the former intuition is constituted by the relevant fact while the latter isn't. To see this, consider the counterpart question applied to the case of perception. To fix ideas, consider an example of a veridical *perceptual* hallucination taken from Bengson: a capricious brain lesion might cause you to hallucinate that there's a red apple in front of you, when, by sheer accident, a red apple is indeed present. This is not a case of successful perception even though your experience matches your visual environment, because your experience isn't properly connected to the fact that there's a red apple in

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<sup>15</sup> Note that this question is metaphysical rather than epistemological. We're not asking whether we could tell the difference between successful and hallucinatory intellectual experiences, but rather we're asking whether there's any fact that explains why the former has some relation to the facts (namely, constitution) while the latter doesn't.

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Cian Dorr for pressing us on this point.

front of you in a non-accidental way. This is the perceptual analogy to the mathematical pedestrian case for intuitions given above.

Even if we assume that PNR is correct, and that what distinguishes a successful perception that  $p$  from a veridical hallucination that  $p$  is that the former, but not the latter, is constituted by the fact that  $p$ , we may still ask: what makes it the case that the former is, but the latter isn't, constituted by the relevant fact? It seems unacceptable to take this difference to be a brute fact. Could it really be that some veridical perceptual experiences, but not others, just happen to be constituted by the facts?

Proponents of PNR have a natural response to this question: the reason why an experience that there's a red apple present caused by a brain lesion isn't constituted by the fact that there's a red apple present and so isn't a case of successful perception is that there is no *causal relation* (of the right sort) between the experiencing subject and the fact that there's a red apple present. This may come as a surprise to the reader, as PNR was presented above as an alternative to a causal theory of perception. However, PNR doesn't need to buy into the whole representationalist story in order to acknowledge that there are causal constraints on perception, and that those play some important role in explaining the constitution facts. There is no in principle barrier for PNR to accept both the very plausible claim that there are causal constraints on perception and the claim that perception isn't a matter of representation, but rather a matter of a relation of constitution between the subject's mental state and the relevant perceived fact.

This kind of view is even advocated in the literature: Alex Moran (2019) argues that accepting causal constraints on perception helps solve an acute problem for PNR, what's known in the perceptual literature as 'the screening off problem'. Getting into this problem and how causal constraints help solve it according to Moran is beyond the scope of the paper. What's important for us is that Moran in effect also argues for another thesis, namely, that accepting causal constraints on perception is compatible with PNR as well as with PNR being an alternative to the causal theory of perception.

The thought goes as follows: proponents of PNR and of the causal theory of perception alike have a reason to accept the claim that perceiving is "a matter of being in contact with the world in a distinctive way", as well as the claim that this contact is causal in nature.<sup>17</sup> However, they should differ on what kind of role causation plays. When adopting causal constraints on perception, proponents of PNR adopt causal constraints on the *type* of the mental state being tokened. That is, whether something is of the mental type of perception (rather than hallucination) would depend on whether the right kind of causal connection is in place. By contrast, the causal theory of perception takes the mental type involved in perception and hallucination to be the same, and causal conditions come into the picture in determining whether that mental type has the property of being a perception or a

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<sup>17</sup> Moran (2019), p. 373.

hallucination. So while both theories can and should agree that perception is causal in nature, they should still disagree on whether that constraint is one that helps individuate the relevant mental type or not.

If this is correct, then PNR can easily solve the perceptual counterpart of *The Non-arbitrary Constitution Question*. The same isn't true about INR: the domain to which INR applies is one of causally inefficacious entities. This is exactly why they are notoriously hard to square with our demand for non-accidentality to begin with. But that means that the natural answer to *The Non-arbitrary Constitution Question* in the case of perception isn't available to INR.<sup>18</sup>

As far as we can tell, no other answer is available either. Bengson correctly insists that answering *The Non-accidental Relation Question* cannot be done in epistemic terms.<sup>19</sup> But if we answer *The Non-arbitrary Constitution Question* in epistemic terms, then appealing to constitution in answering *The Non-accidental Relation Question* violates this condition. If we explain constitution by appeal to epistemic features, and we explain non-accidentality by appeal to constitution, then we explain non-accidentality by appeal to epistemic features due to the transitivity of explanation.<sup>20</sup> And no other relevant non-epistemic connection seems forthcoming — this is exactly why we turned to constitution to begin with.

Even if the proponent of INR could point to some other metaphysical relation that could answer *The Non-arbitrary Constitution Question*, this wouldn't be of much help. For suppose she does. Let's call this relation R. If we could find some relation R that could distinguish between successful and hallucinatory intellectual experiences, why not just point to that to answer both *The Non-arbitrary Constitution Question* and *The Non-accidental Relation Question*? In such a case, the appeal to constitution in the account has become an explanatory idle wheel. Either the appeal to constitution fails, or it is an unnecessary epicycle on a successful answer to *The Non-accidental Relation Question*. Either way, it makes no theoretical progress and we are back at square one.

Finally, one may wonder whether an appeal to Chudnoff's "principle of unity" may help here.<sup>21</sup> As stated in section 1, Chudnoff imposes an additional constraint on veridical intuitions: for our intuitions to be veridical, they must be 'put together' out of their parts such that the unity of their phenomenal character will be partly determined by the relevant

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<sup>18</sup> Bengson (2015, p.13-16) provides examples of non-causal knowledge, such as the knowledge that, of three shapes *I*, *II*, and *III*, the color of *I* is more similar to the color of *II* than the color of *III*. One can know this regardless of the etiology of the experience - even an experience that resulted from a brain lesion of a certain sort could result in knowledge of facts of color similarity. We do not disagree that there can be non-causal states that provide propositional justification and even knowledge. (In fact, we don't take any stand on the justificatory force of *any* of the cases that Bengson and Chudnoff give; we only deny their story explains it.) We do not consider these cases, since by their very nature, they won't provide a good test case for the problem of veridical hallucinations.

<sup>19</sup> Bengson (2015), pp. 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> One may think that explanation is not always transitive. Fair enough. Still, explanation is usually transitive, and the kind of cases that put pressure on transitivity aren't relevant to the case at hand.

<sup>21</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing us on this point.



abstract object or proposition. However, important as this constraint might be for other purposes, it seems idle when considered in our present context. As Chudnoff himself agrees, presentational phenomenology — the phenomenology involved in intuitions — is not factive. And so we can grant Chudnoff's constraint on successful intuitions and restate *The Non-arbitrary Constitution Question* in the following way:

*The Non-Arbitrary Constitution Question\**: What makes it the case that the phenomenal character of some intellectual experiences is partly determined by the essence of the facts, while that of others is not?

Since intuition is modelled over perception, Chudnoff is committed to saying that also in the case of perception the phenomenal character of successful cases is partly determined by the essence of the facts while that of veridical hallucinations isn't. And yet again we can start explaining why this is the case when it comes to perception by appealing to causation, and we have nowhere to start when it comes to intuition. And so we are back at square one.

This objection, if correct, undermines the motivation for INR in two ways. First, it shows that the answer given to the *The Non-accidental Relation Question* is unsatisfactory, and so the reason we had to accept INR — that it alone can answer this long-standing question — is undermined. Second, INR gains a lot of its plausibility from its analogy to PNR, but INR's failure to answer *The Non-arbitrary Constitution Question* shows that this analogy is very limited, and so it's not at all clear how accepting PNR should affect what we think of INR.

### 3 Taking Stock

Perceptual Naive Realism has the potential to remove the epistemic veil between subject and the world. It also provides something of an alternative to traditional, causal theories of perception. Because of these two features, it is sensible to see whether a version of naive realism could do epistemic work as part of a theory of successful intuition experiences. This results in a view we call Intuitional Naive Realism (INR), defended by John Bengson and Elijah Chudnoff.

In this paper, we haven't argued that INR is false. However, we have argued that it cannot do the relevant epistemic work that Bengson and Chudnoff have put it to — it cannot explain the difference between successful intuitions and veridical hallucinatory intuitions, and thus cannot adequately answer *The Non-accidental Relation Question*. Whatever other advantages INR may have, it does not provide any assistance in grounding a complete epistemological theory of the traditionally *a priori* domains (math, logic, morality).

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