Review of THE UNITY OF PERCEPTION: CONTENT, CONSCIOUSNESS, EVIDENCE by Susanna Schellenberg

Craig French (University of Nottingham)
Craig.French@Nottingham.ac.uk

In *The Unity of Perception: Content, Consciousness, Evidence* Susanna Schellenberg presents an account of perception wherein perceptual capacities play a central role. On her view, perception is constituted by the employment of perceptual capacities. And such capacities are the basic element in a 'unified account' of perception (p.2). On such an account, different aspects of perception, most notably perceptual content, perceptual consciousness, and the epistemic force of perception, can all be understood by appeal to the perceptual capacities constitutive of perception (p.2). Schellenberg dubs the view she develops in this mould 'capacitism' (p.2).

Perceptual capacities are at the heart of Schellenberg's view, and she develops her account of them in Chapter 2. According to Schellenberg, perceptual capacities are low-level capacities which function to discriminate and single out particulars in the mind-independent environment (notably, mind-independent objects, events, and property instances). A favourite example of Schellenberg's is the capacity to single out instances of red from instances of blue (p.31).

On Schellenberg's analysis, a given perceptual capacity is individuated by the type of a particular it functions to single out (so the capacity to single out instances of red, say, differs from the capacity to single out instances of circularity) (pp.38-40). And the analysis is an 'asymmetric counterfactual analysis' (p.32). It is *counterfactual* in that possession of a given perceptual capacity is analysed counterfactually as follows: a subject possesses a given perceptual capacity just in case 'if [they] were perceptually related to a particular that the capacity functions to single out, then [they] would be in a position to discriminate and single out that particular' (p.40). (Schellenberg specifies this much more precisely, with important qualifications on pp.40-43). It is *asymmetric* in that the employment of a given perceptual capacity in cases where it fulfils its function is metaphysically and explanatorily more basic than the employment of the very same capacity in cases where it fails to fulfil its function (e.g., an illusion as of an instance of red) (pp.46-47).

There is a lot more to Schellenberg's analysis than what I've captured here, but those are some of the key points. And they highlight how for Schellenberg mind-independent particulars are crucial in her conception of perceptual capacities.

Let's now look at some of the key claims that Schellenberg argues for over the course of the book, and how she puts perceptual capacities to work.

In Chapter 1, Schellenberg defends the claim that perceptions are partly constituted by the particulars we perceive. In Chapter 3, Schellenberg explains this in terms of the idea that perceived particulars are constitutive of the *contents* of perceptions. She further develops the notion of perceptual content in Fregean terms: we are to understand perceptual content not as constituted merely by the particular objects, events and properties we perceive (as on some 'Russellian' views of content), but by Fregean modes of presentation too, where 'a mode of presentation is the specific way in which a subject singles out a perceived particular' (p.85). She dubs her view 'Fregean particularlism' (Chapter 4). Note that these are claims about perceptions and perceptual content but not phenomenal character, which Schellenberg thinks is *not* constituted by particulars (there is more on her positive view of character below).

Now some philosophers may be inclined to reject all of this because they are sceptical of the idea that perception has content. But Schellenberg attempts to fend off such scepticism in Chapter 5, 'In Defense of Perceptual Content'. Not only does she address various objections to the idea that perception has content, but she develops a positive argument for the claim that perception has content (pp.114-116).

In the course of her discussion of perceptual content, Schellenberg embraces a non-disjunctive, or common-kind account of perception and its character. On such an account a veridical perception, illusion and a hallucination can all have the same phenomenal character (pp.77-79), accounted for by a 'metaphysically substantial common element' (p.91). She develops this in the Fregean particularist framework, so as to offer a *content-based* common kind account of veridical perception, illusion, and hallucination. To illustrate this, I'll focus just on veridical perception and hallucination, and leave aside illusion.

Now, given what I've just said about Schellenberg's view of the content of perception (as constituted by particulars), it might seem as though she can only maintain a content-based common-kind account if she holds that, like perceptions, hallucinations have contents which are constituted by particulars (as well as Fregean modes of presentation). But Schellenberg does not hold that hallucinations have contents which are constituted by particulars. How, then, are we to make sense of her view?

Suppose that I see a badger scrubbing around beneath a tree. On Schellenberg's view, the content of my perception is comprised of a *de re* mode of presentation of the badger. The mode of presentation is *de re* in that it is constituted by the badger I see. Consider now the subjectively matching hallucination I have as of a badger scrubbing around beneath a tree. The content of this hallucination, according to Schellenberg, involves a mode of presentation brought about by employing the same perceptual capacities. But it doesn't involve the badger itself, instead, it involves a *gap*. It is gappy.

So, on Schellenberg's view, my perception has content of the form <MOP(b)>, whereas the matching hallucination has content of the form <MOP(_)>, where 'MOP' names the mode of presentation in question, and 'b' names the particular badger, and '_' indicates a gap. (I'm simplifying in my outline here, as on all of Schellenberg's examples the content is fuller, involving property-instances and modes of presentation of those, see pp.88-91). Schellenberg assures us that there is 'nothing metaphysically spooky about gaps'. *Phew!* Rather, the 'gap simply marks the failure to single out a particular' (p.89).

As it stands, however, it is not clear why this should be a *common*-kind account. It looks like the perceptual case and the hallucinatory case differ significantly: perception has object-involving content, whereas hallucination has gappy content.

This is true, Schellenberg, admits, but only at the level of *token* content. When it comes to the *type* of content, there is identity, and this is what makes the account a common-kind account. The type of content common to the two cases is: <MOP[__]> with <MOP(b)> and <MOP(_)> being different token contents of this type (p.91).

But on Schellenberg's account, it's not just that my perception and hallucination have the same content type, but they also have the same phenomenal character. A simple view would be to explain phenomenal character in terms of content, and to explain the sameness of phenomenal character in terms of sameness of content. This isn't quite what Schellenberg holds – at least, it is not the whole story, and it neglects to highlight the fundamental element in her story. For her, there is another,

more basic element which we need to add into the explanation: perceptual capacities. The idea is that the experiences have the same character because they have the same content type (so it is a content-based common kind account), *but this is because the same perceptual capacities are employed in both cases*. The employment of perceptual capacities is what yields perceptual content, and so what *ultimately* accounts for phenomenal character and the sameness of phenomenal character across these cases. Thus:

> How should we understand the content types? According to Fregean particularism, a perception, a hallucination, and an illusion with the same phenomenal character share a metaphysically substantial common element: the perceptual capacities employed. Employing perceptual capacities yields a content type that experiential states with the same phenomenal character have in common (pp.91-92).

Schellenberg argues that employing perceptual capacities constitutes content. Applied to the case at hand, I take it that Schellenberg would hold that employing a perceptual capacity for discriminating and singling out badgers or badger-like creatures is constitutive of my perception having content involving MOP. For MOP is, after all, just the specific way in which I single out the perceived badger.

Schellenberg develops her view of phenomenal character, or perceptual consciousness further in Chapter 6 'Perceptual Consciousness as Mental Activity'. In that chapter she argues that 'perceptual consciousness is constituted by a mental activity, namely the mental activity of employing perceptual capacities' (p.141). In the course of her discussion of perceptual consciousness Schellenberg nicely summarizes the common-kind aspect of her overall view that we've just been focusing on:

> Consider Hallie who suffers a hallucination as of a white cup on a desk. Like Percy [a subject who *perceives* a white cup on the desk], she employs the capacity to discriminate and single out white from other colors and she employs the capacity to differentiate and single out cup-shapes from, say, computer-shapes and lamp-shapes. Since she is hallucinating rather than perceiving, and so is not perceptually related to a particular white cup, she employs these capacities baselessly. Yet even though she fails to single out any particular white cup, she is in a phenomenal state that is as of a white cup, in virtue of employing perceptual capacities that purport to single out a white cup. As in the case of perception, employing these perceptual capacities constitutes her phenomenal character. So what perception, hallucination, and illusion have in common is that perceptual capacities are employed that constitute the phenomenal character of the relevant experiential states (p. 152).

So far, then, we can see not only what some of Schellenberg's main claims are, but capacitism in action. Perceptual capacities are at the heart of her accounts of content and consciousness. What about the other strand of Schellenberg's work, evidence, or more generally, the epistemology of perception?

Schellenberg has a lot to say in the epistemology of perception. For instance, in Chapter 8, she discusses and rejects luminosity (c.f., Williamson 2000, Chapter 4). In Chapter 9 she presents a new analysis of perceptual knowledge with perceptual capacities at its heart. On her analysis, assuming that *S* has evidence sufficient for knowledge (more on which below), '*S* has perceptual knowledge that *p* if and only if *p* is true, *S* employed a capacity to single out what she purports to single out, and *S's* mental state has the content it has in virtue of *S* having successfully employed her capacity to single out what she purports to single out' (p.206). In Chapter 10, Schellenberg distinguishes her views in the epistemology of perception from other views, such as knowledge-first approaches,

versions of reliabilism, and versions of virtue epistemology. But it strikes me that Schellenberg's most significant contribution here comes in Chapter 7, on perceptual evidence.

In this chapter, Schellenberg argues that perception provides us with two types of evidence: phenomenal evidence and factive evidence. Phenomenal evidence, Schellenberg notes, 'is determined by how our environment sensorily seems to us when we are experiencing' (p.167). Hallucinations too provide us with phenomenal evidence. Factive perceptual evidence, on the other hand, is 'necessarily determined by the perceived particulars such that the evidence is guaranteed to be an accurate guide to the environment' (p.167). Hallucinations do not provide us with such evidence. So, when I see the badger scrubbing around under the tree, I have phenomenal evidence in that it seems to me that a badger is scrubbing around under the tree. The same is true of a matching hallucination. But I also have a stronger kind of evidence in the perceptual case (but not the hallucinatory case), factive perceptual evidence, in virtue of my perceptual link to the particular badger in question. Factive evidence is, on Schellenberg's view, sufficient for knowledge, whereas phenomenal evidence is not (p.205).

With this account, Schellenberg is able to neatly capture two intuitions. On the one hand ithe intuition that hallucinations are not epistemically empty, they do provide us with some sort of evidence. On the other hand is the intuition that genuine veridical perception provides us with *more* or *better* evidence than hallucinations – evidence sufficient for knowledge.

In developing this view of perceptual evidence Schellenberg once again puts perceptual capacities to work. For she argues that both phenomenal and factive evidence 'have their rational source in the perceptual capacities employed in experience' (p.183). For the phenomenal evidence an experience provides is determined by the content *type* of the experience it involves. *And this is constituted by the employment of perceptual capacities.* Whereas the factive evidence an experience provides is determined by the *token* content of the experience. *And this is constituted by the employment of perceptual capacities* (together with the relevant particulars). Thus, Schellenberg provides a 'unified account of perceptual evidence' (p.167) with perceptual capacities doing the unifying work. She argues for this view in Chapter 7, details its advantages on pp.185-187, and puts it to work in the subsequent epistemological discussion of Chapters 8 and 9.

From this brief overview of some of the main claims that Schellenberg argues for, I hope it is clear that this book is wide-ranging, and that it will appeal to philosophers across many different branches of the philosophy of perception, and epistemologists too. The book is also quite comprehensive: as well as making original contributions, Schellenberg surveys existing contributions and situates her view in relation to others.

By way of critical comment, I will limit myself to Schellenberg's argument in the first chapter for the thesis that our perceptions are partially constituted by the particulars we perceive. Schellenberg argues as follows:

I. If a subject *S* perceives particular α, then *S* discriminates and singles out α (as a consequence of being perceptually related to α).
II. If *S* discriminates and singles out α (as a consequence of being perceptually related to α), then *S*'s perceptual state *M* brought about by being perceptually related to α is constituted by discriminating and singling out α.
III. If *S*'s perceptual state *M* brought about by being perceptually related to α is constituted by discriminating and singling out α, then *S*'s perceptual state *M* brought about by being perceptually related to α is constituted by α.

> From: I-III: If *S* perceives α, then *S*'s perceptual state *M* brought about by being perceptually related to α is constituted by α.
>
> (pp.24-25)

I will focus my critical attention on premise I. Premise I specifies a condition on perceiving a particular: namely, that if one perceives a particular, one must discriminate and single it out from 'its surround' (p.25). Schellenberg notes that the 'necessity in question is metaphysical necessity (not logical or natural necessity)' (p.25). And she holds that this condition is 'modality general', not restricted to vision (p.25).

What does Schellenberg say in support of this premise?

> In support of Premise I we can say that it is unclear what it would be to perceive a particular without at the very least discriminating and singling it out from its surround. Consider a perceiver who sees a white cup on a desk. He employs his capacity to discriminate white from other colors and to single out white in his environment. Similarly, he employs his capacity to differentiate and single out cup-shapes from, say, computer shapes and lamp-shapes. Such discriminatory activity allows for scene segmentation, border and edge detection, and region extraction. If there is no discriminatory activity, it is unclear how he could be perceptually aware of the cup (p.25).

My first comment is that these remarks seem most relevant to supporting the condition as applied to vision and touch, but it is not clear how they carry over to, say, audition and olfaction. And, further, it seems to me that reflection on cases of olfaction and audition might put pressure on the condition.

Consider first the following case. I am in a dreamless sleep, I awake and hear a sound: that of a sustained single note played on an electronic organ (the neighbour is recording some experimental music). I hear this sound for about 30 seconds before falling straight back into the dreamless sleep. I heard the sound but did my hearing of the sound involve my discriminating it from its *surround*? This is not obvious. And one could argue that the sound *has no* surround. That is, there is nothing else auditorily perceived (or auditorily apparent) to me, either before, after, or during my hearing of the sound, which I discriminate the sound from.

The olfactory case is a simple modification of the auditory case. Suppose that upon awaking from my dreamless sleep I smell the scent from a scented candle by the bedside. I get a whiff of it and return to my dreamless sleep. Do I discriminate this smell from its surround? Again, it is not obvious that there *is* an olfactory surround: there is nothing else olfactorily perceived (or olfactorily apparent to me), either before, after, or during my smelling of the smell, which I discriminate the smell from.

One reply to the auditory case is that when I hear the sound of the organ I do auditorily discriminate it from an aspect of its surround after all. I auditorily discriminate it from the *silence* I hear elsewhere in the auditory scene. But whether this reply can be developed satisfactorily is far from obvious. First, it relies not only on the controversial idea that we can hear silence but the more controversial idea that we can hear silence at the same time as hearing sound. Now even if we can persuade ourselves of the viability of these ideas, we can stipulate that in this case the sound of the organ is very loud and prominent such that it crowds out not only other sounds, but surrounding and concurrent *silences*. So, once again, we seem to have a case of hearing a sound without discriminating it from its surround. It may be peculiar, but a case as described does seem to be

metaphysically possible, which is all that is required to challenge Schellenberg's condition. And a similar point can be made in response to the equivalent reply to the olfactory case.

On Schellenberg's view we don't need to hear sound *first* to then discriminate it from something else. Rather, we need to auditorily discriminate it from something else – in the sense of auditorily 'register differences' (p.37) between it and something else – and this is what hearing it amounts to. Does highlighting this help to respond to the points above? It is not obvious that it does. For the case can be re-described as one in which there is, at no point, no relevant auditory registering of differences in play. In the auditory case we can suppose that no silence is auditorily registered or otherwise brought into the mix, and thus there is no question of registering any differences between the sound and surrounding silence. There is no relevant auditory registering of differences for the hearing of the sound to amount to. (Similarly for the olfactory case).

Though the above is assertive, we can perhaps more helpfully frame the point instead as an explanatory challenge: how is it possible for me to hear the sound of the organ in this case, given the details of the case, and given the discrimination requirement on hearing? This breaks down into a number of different questions: what do I discriminate the sound from? An aspect of its surround? But it seems to have no surround. So perhaps we can include *silence* as an aspect of its surround. But then *how* does silence get into the mix such that I register the difference between it and the sound (such as to constitute my hearing the sound). And – supposing this can be addressed – *why* think that this is what my hearing the sound amounts to? (Similar questions arise with respect to the olfactory case).

But what about the condition as applied to vision? Most of Schellenberg's discussion in the book is about visual perception, so perhaps she would be happy to settle for a version of premise I and the argument restricted to vision. But even ~~then~~then, I think we can challenge premise I.

Dretske (1969) endorses a similar condition to Schellenberg's premise I (as restricted to vision), for he holds that one sees an object only if one visually differentiates it from its surroundings (p.20). But he presents a challenge to this condition with a case we can call *Nose*:

> Touch your nose to a large smooth wall and stare fixedly at the area of the wall in front of you. There is not much doubt about the fact that you see the wall, or at least a portion of it. It is also fairly clear that you do not differentiate it from its immediate surroundings. In this position it has no environment… (Dretske, 1969, p.26)

This ~~To build up to this, consider Dretske's (1969) endorsement of something similar to the condition specified in premise I (restricted to vision). He holds that one sees an object only if one visually differentiates it from its surroundings (p.20). But he considers a challenge from the following case:~~

Though she doesn't credit it to Dretske, Schellenberg is well aware of this case and the potential challenge it poses to her view. We'll come to her own response to it shortly. But first let's consider why Dretske's own response and how it might help Schellenberg.

However, I now want to suggest that we can challenge even this condition. Consider the following case, *Invisible Frame,* adapted from French (2018, pp.144-145)

> Imagine a modern art gallery known for its quirky installations. In this gallery one of the installations is a large frame, on one of the gallery walls. The frame is empty, it doesn't house anything. Thus, when installed, one can see right through the frame's rectangular gap to the wall it is attached to. Suppose also that the frame is designed so as to visually blend in

with the wall behind it. That is, suppose the colour and texture of the frame's surface matches the colour and texture of the wall's surface. Suppose also that although the frame is very large in that it effectively "frames" a large area of the wall, its structural parts (the lengths of material used to construct the rectangular shaped frame) are extremely thin, so that when attached to the wall it barely extends out from the wall. This helps to reduce shadows and other depth cues which might otherwise prevent the visual blending or camouflage effect that the artist is going for. Suppose also that the lighting is carefully designed so as to help bring about this effect.

Let's suppose that viewers don't just fail to notice the frame, they literally can't see it. This makes sense if seeing a thing requires it to be discriminated from its surround. Yet the frame still looks some way to such viewers in that it is an element of the scene before them, in their field of vision, which makes a positive contribution to how the overall scene looks to them (see here Dretske 1969, pp.23-24).

Now consider a subject, Juliet. Suppose that she is viewing the installation. Juliet has no idea that there is a frame there. Suppose she puts her nose right up to the wall so that all that is in her field of vision is the wall (she doesn't get any of the frame in her field of vision at that moment). As noted in relation to *Nose*, intuitively in such conditions Juliet *can* see the wall, even though she doesn't visually discriminate it. But now suppose she gradually moves back so as a bit of the frame enters her field of vision, but she cannot visually discriminate it from the wall. In these circumstances, it seems plausible to suppose that Juliet still doesn't see the *frame*, but would we be inclined to think that she now doesn't see the *wall* before her? Surely not! But at *this* moment a bit of the frame enters into her field of vision and looks some way to her, so now the wall *does* have an immediate environment, but she doesn't visually discriminate the wall from this environment.

The problem here is that applying the restricted version of Schellenberg's premise I to this case delivers the result that when Juliet gradually moves away from the wall and a little of the frame comes into her field of vision, she no longer sees the wall. But this is counterintuitive. ~~Thus the reply we offered Schellenberg to *Nose*, adapting Dretske's own reply, can be challenged.~~

If I'm right about *Invisible Frame*, then drawing on Dretske doesn't help Schellenberg. So let's look at Schellenberg's own response.

First Schellenberg highlights a response which she recognizes is flawed. She notes that~~Schellenberg considers *Nose* directly (though she doesn't credit the example to Dretske), and offers a reply of her own (which serves as a reply to *Invisible Frame* too). Does this fair any better? First Schellenberg notes that~~ 'when we stare at an undifferentiated and uniform field of color the *ganzfield* effect sets in: after a few minutes, one simply sees black and experiences an apparent sense of blindness due to the lack of structure in one's environment' (p. 27). Now, one issue with this response (which Schellenberg doesn't highlight) is that ~~it is not obvious how relevant this initial remark is, for~~ though it may tell us what *actually happens*, it doesn't ~~obviously~~ tell us what *must* happen as a matter of metaphysical necessity. For all the response says,~~Schellenberg has said,~~ it is metaphysically possible for one to see a wall that is uniformly coloured and that fills one's entire field of vision *without* the ganzfield effect setting in. But the issue that Schellenberg herself notes, is that

S~~Someone~~ omeone resisting Schellenberg's approach will maintain, in line with the verdicts encouraged by *Nose* and *Invisible Frame*, that *before* the effect sets in, the subjects see the uniformly coloured wall even though they do not visually discriminate it from its surroundings. In

contrast, Schellenberg says the following
happens before the effect sets in: ~~is the following:~~

> The particularist can argue that the subject employs perceptual capacities insofar as she is discriminating the part of the uniformly colored wall to her right from the part of the wall to her left. While the different parts of the wall have the same color, they occupy different locations within the subject's egocentric frame of reference. So she is employing perceptual capacities to discriminate the parts of the uniformly colored wall within her egocentric frame of reference' (p.27)

But it is unclear how to interpret Schellenberg's move here. On one interpretation, the claim is that before the effect sets in – in *Nose* and *Invisible Frame* – the subjects *don't* see the wall, but *only* certain parts of it. If that is what Schellenberg is claiming, she doesn't motivate it. For she doesn't speak to the intuition that the subjects in our cases can see *the wall* right before their eyes, and not just parts of it. (Note that they might not see the *whole of* the wall, but that is no bar to them seeing, *the wall*).

But a second interpretation is that Schellenberg is claiming that before the effect sets in, the subjects *are* seeing the wall, but her premise is in good order as there *is* appropriate discriminatory activity occurring after all.

An immediate response is that it is just not clear why, in order to see the wall, Dretske's subject in *Nose* or Juliet in *Invisible Frame must* engage in the discriminatory activity that Schellenberg describes. They *may* engage in such activity, but why *must* they? ~~Perhaps when they are focusing so intently on the *wall itself* they simply don't discriminate its parts from each other, or register such differences between the parts.~~

But the main problem is that this move shifts attention away from *the wall* which is allegedly seen in *Nose* and *Invisible Frame* to *parts* of the wall. Our cases encourage the thought that *the wall* is seen despite not being visually discriminated from its surroundings. This is counter to Schellenberg's claim that if a particular α is seen then *it* must be discriminated from its surroundings. It is not clear how it helps with this to note that when α is seen some of its *parts* are discriminated from each other. Schellenberg's initial condition is *not* that for *S* to see α *S* must engage in *some discriminatory activity or other*, or even some *α-related* discriminatory activity or other. It is more specifically that *S* must discriminate *α itself* from *its* surroundings. This is not secured in Schellenberg's reply.

The problem cases I've presented hinge on the idea that one can perceive a particular without discriminating it from its *surroundings.* My framing of things in this way derives from Schellenberg's framing of things in this way in the *support* that she gives for her premise, and the claim that 'it is unclear what it would be to perceive a particular without at the very least discriminating and singling it out from *its surround*' (p. 25, my emphasis). Yet Schellenberg's *premise* doesn't say that if *S* perceives particular α, then *S* discriminates and singles out α *from its surroundings*. It merely says that if a subject *S* perceives particular α, then *S* discriminates and singles out α. But whether this observation helps to respond to the above cases is unclear. For *what,* if not an aspect of the relevant particulars' surroundings, does the subject discriminate the particular *from* in these cases, such that they perceive the relevant particular? It is not clear how Schellenberg would answer this question.

So, to conclude, though I am sympathetic to the particularist position that Schellenberg advocates, I don't think that Schellenberg has yet developed a plausible capacitist argument for the view. This doesn't, of course, support a general scepticism about Schellenberg's carefully developed capacitist

project. The book is packed full of capacitist arguments that I haven't touched upon here, and which I'm sure will generate much fruitful discussion.[1]

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Williamson, Timothy (2000). *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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[1] Thanks to Susanna Schellenberg and Anil Gomes for discussion.