

# Perception from the phenomenal stance

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## 1. Introduction

The distance from the display of my computer to the window is less than a meter. I can see this, I can judge that it is true, but it seems to me that there is also a sense in which I can ‘feel’ the distance. It is not merely that I have discriminatory abilities: it is that experiencing the distance has a specific phenomenal character. There is ‘something it is like’ to experience the spatial relations between the two objects, and this differs in hard-to-express ways from what it is like to see colors or to hear sounds. Perception guides our behavior, and through perceptual experience we acquire knowledge of our environment. But perceptual experience also comes with a specific phenomenal ‘feel’. I will argue that doing justice to the phenomenal character of perceptual experience requires a distinctive approach towards perceivers, namely the *phenomenal stance*.<sup>1</sup> I will explicate this approach by drawing on the sensorimotor account of perceptual experience (e.g. O’Regan & Noë, 2001).

At present, we can distinguish two broad and well-known perspectives on consciousness. Borrowing from Joseph Levine (1994), we could say that some theorists are ‘qualophilic’ while others are ‘qualophobic’. Qualophiles argue that standard theories of cognitive functioning fail to capture the qualitative character of experience, insisting that there is more to explain than cognitive functions or discriminatory abilities (e.g. Levine, 1994; Block, 1996; Chalmers, 1996). Some conclude that there must exist something in the world over and above the processes underlying our cognitive functioning, proposing natural laws connecting information with experience (Chalmers, 1996), or neural processes that are not involved in cognitive access (Block, 2007). Qualophobes such as Daniel Dennett point out that these ‘extra ingredients’ could be different without any difference in perceptual judgments, arguing that it is unclear what reason we could have to posit experiential differences that make no such difference. On this view, no extra ingredient is required to ensure that the functional processes of cognitive access are accompanied by phenomenal ‘feel’ (e.g. Dennett, 1991b; Dretske, 1995; Tye, 1995).

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<sup>1</sup> I had been thinking about the phenomenal stance for some time when Erik Myin brought a paper by Robbins and Jack (2006) to my attention. The idea of the phenomenal stance discussed here is essentially the same as theirs, but while they focus on the adoption of the stance, my main concern is the phenomenon at which the stance is aimed, as explained in Section 3.

Of course the qualophobe does not deny that we have perceptual abilities. One way or another we have access to our environment. Disagreement concerns whether there is more to phenomenal experience than that. Is there more to perceptual experience than access to *intentional content*, to the (apparent) object of experience? Qualophobic forms of *intentionalism* claim that that there is not (e.g. Byrne, 2001; Dretske, 1995; Tye, 1995). But I will argue that this leaves part of experience unaddressed.

In this paper I aim for a third road between the extremes of qualophilia and qualophobia. I share the qualophilic view that the phenomenal character of experience calls for an explanation, and that this explanation is not given by accounts of discriminatory abilities or cognitive access. At the same time, I share the qualophobe's suspicion that a qualophilic appeal to 'extra ingredients' will not be very helpful.

The tool to develop a third road will be a stances-approach: I will claim that to focus on cognitive access is to take a particular stance towards a perceiver, and that to focus on the phenomenal character of perceptual experience is to take a very different stance. While different stances towards perceivers can single out different aspects of their perceptual experience, this does not imply that there must be additional underlying processes involved, or different fundamental laws or properties. An interest in phenomenal character differs from an interest in behavior and cognitive access, but from this we should not conclude that what enables the phenomenal character of experience involves anything over and above the processes enabling behavior and cognitive access.

The roots of the stances-approach are of course in Daniel Dennett's idea of the *intentional stance* (Dennett, 1987). Taking the intentional stance towards a system (e.g. towards a perceiver) involves interpreting this system as having intentional states such as beliefs and desires. The idea is that only by taking the appropriate stance can one identify certain objective patterns in human behavior: intentional behavior and mental states simply do not figure in detached descriptions in terms of physical processes (see also MacKay, 1962).

As this paper is focused on *perceptual* experience, I will focus on perceptual states, a subset of intentional states. Since perceptual states can be judged as veridical or false in virtue of their content, we could say that with this focus, the intentional stance is directed at the 'perceptual beliefs' or (potential) 'perceptual knowledge' of the perceiver. When applied to perception, the intentional stance takes an interest in the intentional content of a system's perceptual experience, in what its experience is an experience of.

When we adopt the *phenomenal stance*, we treat perceivers as subjects having phenomenal experience; from the phenomenal stance we take an interest in what their experience is like (Robbins & Jack, 2006).<sup>2</sup> I will aim to characterize perceptual experience from this perspective by drawing on the sensorimotor account, as proposed by Kevin O'Regan and Alva Noë (2001).

My focus on the perceiver's phenomenal experience should be sufficient to avoid a possible misreading of the idea of a stance: the concept of a phenomenal stance should

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the phrase 'what an experience is like' is used as synonymous to 'what the phenomenal character of an experience is'. I bypass some of the worries from Nagel's famous 'what it is like to be a bat?' (Nagel, 1974), for I will not require that an account of the phenomenal character of experience produces this very experience in the one who understands the account.

not be taken to imply that the phenomenon of interest is merely ‘in the eye of the beholder’, as if phenomenal experience does not really exist. The idea of a stance is not opposed to the reality of phenomenal experience; rather the stances-approach should be seen in contrast to the above-mentioned appeal to ‘extra ingredients’.

The paper is structured as follows. First I will regard perceptual experience from the intentional stance, focusing on intentional content (Section 2). Then I introduce the phenomenal stance (Section 3), which will be fleshed out for perceptual experience by means of the sensorimotor account (Section 4). This account is contrasted with the intentional stance account (Section 5), leading to the conclusion (Section 6) that the concept of a phenomenal stance allows us to do justice to the phenomenal character of experience in a way that opens a third road between qualophobia and qualophilia.

## 2. Perception from the intentional stance

What is the intentional content of our (veridical or non-veridical) perceptual experience? In this section we will regard conscious human perceivers from the intentional stance as familiar from Daniel Dennett (1987). The intentional stance takes an interest in such mental phenomena as beliefs, desires, preferences, and aims, which simply do not figure in detached physical descriptions of the world. We will single out a subset of these intentional states: by focusing the intentional stance on perceptual experience, we will focus on intentional content. What we take ourselves or others to perceive can be the case, or it can fail to be the case. The intentional stance, when aimed at perception, therefore takes an interest in epistemically evaluable content, in ‘perceptual belief’ or (potential) ‘perceptual knowledge’.

Note that the issue here is not by means of what underlying mechanisms we come to have the perceptual knowledge that we have. Neither do we need to get into the controversy concerning direct perception versus indirect perception: my discussion will be neutral with respect to these issues. The question is purely a matter of the perceptual content that can reasonably be ascribed to a perceiver. Let us consider such an issue of content to see what can be discerned when we adopt the intentional stance.

Say you are looking at two similarly-sized trees standing at different distances from you. You will often be able to see that the trees are of similar sizes, and of course that they are standing at different distances. But there is more to your visual experience than that. As Christopher Peacocke notes, “the nearer tree occupies more of your visual field than the more distant tree”, and “this is as much a feature of your experience itself as its representing the trees as being the same height” (Peacocke, 1983, p. 12). I think this is quite right. In fact, equal sizes at different distances could in principle be represented in experience *without* the representation of a difference in apparent size.<sup>3</sup> But in normal visual experience, often the more distant tree *will* in a sense appear smaller. A theory of perceptual experience should acknowledge this.

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<sup>3</sup> The following sentence presents a linguistic analogue of this possibility, in which no difference in apparent size is mentioned: ‘There is a ten meter tall tree at a hundred meter distance, and a ten meter tall tree at two hundred meter distance.’

Now, according to Peacocke, “no veridical experience can represent one tree as larger than another and also as the same size as the other” (Peacocke, 1983, p. 12). From this he concludes that one of the above-mentioned properties of experience must be a non-representational property. He proposes to distinguish ‘sensational’ properties of experience from their representational properties. Representational properties of experience are the way the experience represents the world to be; they are the intentional content of experience. Sensational properties are “properties an experience has in virtue of some aspect – other than its representational content – of what it is like to have that experience” (Peacocke, 1983, p. 5). While the sizes of the trees are represented as being similar, Peacocke argues that the sensational properties of the experience of the trees differ. The *sizes* of the trees are perceived as similar, while their ‘sensational’ *apparent sizes* differ.

To generalize the issue, we could distinguish *nonperspectival properties* from *perspectival properties* (e.g. Noë, 2004). Nonperspectival properties are properties of the object of perception that do not depend on the perceiver’s perspectival positioning, such as the size of a tree, the roundness of a coin, or the glossiness of a metallic surface. Perspectival properties are properties that do depend on the perspective of the perceiver, such as the size a tree occupies in your visual field, the elliptical appearance of a coin when viewed under an angle, or the specific place where reflections appear on a glossy surface. An account of perceptual experience should do justice both to nonperspectival properties and to perspectival properties. Are perspectival properties then, as Peacocke’s discussion suggests, *non-representational* properties of perceptual experience? Answering this question is the business of the intentional stance, for it concerns what we perceive.

Peacocke’s reason to deny the status of intentional content to perspectival properties was the apparent conflict that would otherwise result within perception: how can the intentional content of our experience contain the sameness of size as well as the difference of size of the two trees? How can we perceive a coin as round but at the same time as elliptical? However, while these combinations of intentional content may seem problematic, it has been argued that the conflict is only apparent. For as Noë (2002) points out, the property of occupying a certain extent of your visual field is a different property from the property of having certain physical dimensions. As a result, Peacocke’s problem of incompatible veridical content does not seem to arise: there is nothing contradictory in the idea that an experience represents two objects as being the same size, while also representing that they have a different perspectival size from here.<sup>4</sup>

Now it is generally accepted that we can perceive nonperspectival properties. For example, we can often see that a coin is round: that is how, in experiencing, we take the

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<sup>4</sup> Irvin Rock (1977) spoke of ‘proximal mode experiences’ to refer to experiences of perspectival properties, arguing that: “Proximal mode experiences are better thought of as perceptions rather than as sensations” (Rock, 1977, p. 349). His proposal avoided incompatible content by suggesting that we perceive perspectival size based on visual angle. Peacocke objected to this proposal suggesting that representational content depends on the possession of concepts (Peacocke, 1983, p. 19-20). He argued that the experience of someone who does not possess the concept of visual angle cannot represent this property. Against this, it can be argued that the possession of concepts is not required for intentional content (e.g. Jacob & Jeannerod, 2003). Alternatively, one may suppose that the relevant concepts are in fact in place when we perceive perspectival properties, even if these concepts may not normally include the concept of visual angle.

world to be. Such nonperspectival properties can clearly figure in the intentional content of perceptual experience. But there is no elliptical object to be perceived when you look at a round coin, and you do not experience the coin as actually being elliptical. Can we nevertheless regard the perspectival appearance of a coin as part of the intentional content of perceptual experience?

What speaks in favor of this is the fact that there is a clear objective side to how things appear from a certain perspective. Where reflections appear on an object, how much of a scene is occluded by an object, or how much noise can be heard, these are all objective properties of the world as perceived from the bodily position of a perceiver. In this sense perspectival properties can be thought of as perfectly objective environmental properties (e.g. Harman, 1990; Noë, 2002; 2004). They relate to the properties of objects by precise mathematical laws, such as the laws of linear perspective (Noë, 2004). From this perspective, it is an objective property of the stimulus that the ‘perspectival shape’ of a coin is elliptical when the coin is viewed from an angle, or that the perspectival view of a flat object reduces to a line when it is viewed from aside. This objectivity may allow us to think of these properties as objects of perception.

A good way to assess whether perspectival properties figure in the intentional content of perception is by asking whether we can be wrong about them. For in as far as it is possible to be mistaken about these properties, or to be right about them, it makes sense to speak of illusory or veridical experience of these properties.

An example can show the possibility that we can be mistaken about perspectival properties. Consider the shiny spots that can be experienced on glossy surfaces, known as specular highlights or specular reflections. The place where these reflections appear on objects depends on the perspective of the perceiver, which makes them perspectival properties (Madary, 2008). At the subpersonal level, the highlights function as ‘evidence’ for the nonperspectival glossiness of objects, as well as for the object’s shape. But it seems clear that specular highlights can also be perceived themselves. Indeed, the possibility of misperception of specular highlights seems assured by the following three facts: first, specular highlights can evidently be experienced, second, it is a perfectly objective feature of the environment where the specular highlights appear on a surface when looked at from a certain perspective, and third, our visual systems are fallible. This suggests that specular highlights are as (mis)perceivable as gloss or shape.

It would then seem plausible that the possibility for misperception applies to other perspectival properties as well. If a perceiver would judge that the farthest tree of Peacocke’s two same-sized trees occupies the largest part of his visual field, he would be wrong. Such a mistake may not typically occur, but the point is that this type of mistaken judgment seems possible, given that the perspectival size of a tree is an objective feature of the world as encountered from a certain perspective. The point may be generalized, for it seems that the objectivity of perspectival properties ensures the possibility for misperception.

But should we indeed attribute this possibility for misperception to the perspectival properties? Against this interpretation, one might suggest that the mistake would be ‘parasitic’ on a mistaken perception of the nonperspectival properties. Suppose for example that the apparent misperception of the location of a specular highlight boils

down to the erroneous experience of the (nonperspectival) shape of the object. Or that a mistaken judgment concerning the perspectival sizes of two trees is in fact based in a misperception of the actual sizes of the trees. The mistaken judgment on the highlights or perspectival sizes would then derive from the mistaken perception of shape or size, and this would weaken the case for placing these perspectival properties at the side of the intentional content of experience. The question, then, is whether perspectival properties provide a distinctive possibility for making mistakes.

As Susanna Schellenberg (2007) has argued, building on Noë (2004) and others, the perception of nonperspectival properties depends on the sensitivity to perspectival properties.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, she provides an explicitly *epistemic* interpretation of this dependency: given the idea that perspectival properties are epistemically primary, she aims to characterize the requirements for the perception of nonperspectival properties. Given this notion of epistemic primacy, the question becomes whether there is *already* room for misperception (and thereby for genuine perception) at the basic level of perspectival properties.

According to Schellenberg, *perceiving* nonperspectival properties epistemically depends on *perceiving* the perspectival properties. To make sense of this double use of the term ‘perceiving’, let us suppose that at least in the second instance of ‘perceiving’, conscious experience need not be involved. On this view, the (conscious) perception of nonperspectival properties depends on the (subpersonal) contact with perspectival properties. In this sense, of course, also the conscious experience of perspectival properties depends on perceiving the perspectival properties.

At the level of conscious experience, neither the perception of perspectival properties nor the perception of nonperspectival properties has to be epistemically foundational of the other. After all, it is perfectly conceivable that some perceivers would be more certain about nonperspectival properties than about perspectival properties, and the nonperspectival properties could even figure as evidence justifying claims on perspectival properties. The experience of the roundness of a coin, together with the experience of the tilt of the coin, could lead to the conclusion that the coin must appear elliptical from here. The reverse is possible as well: a perceiver could conclude that a coin is round, based on conscious awareness of the perspectival shape of the coin as viewed under a certain angle. The conscious experience of perspectival properties and of nonperspectival properties may in fact be based on overlapping underlying processes, in a way that precludes an analysis according to which either of the experiences forms the basis for the other. On the level of conscious experience, neither perspectival properties nor nonperspectival properties need to be basic.

The reliability of the conscious experience of these properties is of course an empirical matter. It cannot be decided a priori whether, at the level of conscious experience, a perceiver can be more certain of the perception of perspectival properties or of the perception of nonperspectival properties. With training the reliability may shift, as when someone gets more sensitive to perspectival properties due to experience with painting. If this is right, conscious perception of perspectival properties are not

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<sup>5</sup> Schellenberg (2007) speaks of ‘intrinsic properties’ and ‘situation-dependent properties’ to refer to what I call nonperspectival and perspectival properties respectively.

necessarily the starting-point for personal-level epistemic practices. But neither are non-perspectival properties.

These considerations suggest that, at the level of conscious experience, perspectival properties may be robustly on the same side as nonperspectival properties, that is, they may be on the side of intentional content. What Peacocke classified as ‘sensational properties’ may then figure in the intentional characterization of perceptual experience. The intentional stance, when aimed at perceptual experience, can reveal both perspectival properties and nonperspectival properties as potential objects of perceptual experience.

Given that the intentional stance can do justice to perspectival properties as well as to nonperspectival properties, it yields a relatively rich notion of perceptual content. This richness may raise the impression that nothing is missing from its account. But let us now approach perception from a different entry point, and see where that might lead us.

### **3. The phenomenal stance**

The question in this section is no longer what experience would tell the perceiver about his environment if the experience were veridical. Rather, we take the *phenomenal stance* towards a system, which is to regard it as a locus of phenomenal experience, and to take an interest in the character of this experience (Robbins & Jack, 2006). Here I will introduce this stance, and I will highlight a difference between the resulting view on experience and the account in terms of intentional content. In Section 4 and 5, we will see whether we can identify aspects of experience that become salient from the phenomenal stance, which are overlooked by the intentional stance.

Philip Robbins and Anthony Jack (2006) argue that different cognitive capacities are involved in our thinking about physical processes as compared to our thinking about intentionality and phenomenal experience. Regarding a system as a purely physical mechanism is one thing, regarding others as intentional systems is another, and regarding them as phenomenal beings is to take yet another stance. The context in which their discussion is framed is the psychology of the observer: if the adoption of these different stances are competing psychological processes, Robbins and Jack argue, this may help to explain why many people find it difficult to understand how a system can be capable of conscious experience, while it is at the same time a physical systems. At least part of the intuition that there is an explanatory gap between physical processes and conscious experience, they suggest, “results from more or less hard-wired restrictions on information flow across competing neural networks” (Robbins & Jack, 2006, p. 78). The idea is that the difficulty to fit physical processes and phenomenal experiences together in one’s mind exceeds the difficulty of combining a merely physical interpretation and an intentional interpretation of a system. They discuss evidence indicating that regarding others as having phenomenal experience is in fact a different capacity from adopting the intentional stance.

Dennett already pointed out that there is more to normal human interaction than can be captured within the intentional stance. A reason for this is that the intentional stance lacks a moral dimension. We can usefully regard robots and chess computers from the intentional stance, but even if we do so, “one is guilty of no monstrosities if one

dismembers the computer with whom one plays chess, or even the robot with whom one has long conversations” (Dennett, 1978, p. 240). When we treat other human beings as the object of moral concern, Dennett proposed, we take a moral or personal stance towards them (Dennett, 1978). But when do we adopt this moral stance? Robbins and Jack argue that this has its basis in our everyday psychological capacity to treat others as possessing experiential states (Robbins & Jack, 2006). For the question then is not so much what beliefs or other propositional attributes others can have, as in the intentional stance, but rather whether for example they can suffer.<sup>6</sup>

When we encounter someone who is suffering, we naturally take the phenomenal stance towards this person. But perhaps adopting the phenomenal stance towards someone’s *perceptual* experience is less common. For example, when we encounter someone who is looking at a colorful scene, we typically will not be concerned with the way the colors appear to that person. Given that we are often more interested in what the world is like than in what the experience of the world is like, taking the phenomenal stance towards others *as perceivers* may not be our natural attitude. But common or not, we certainly can take such a stance. For example, we may at times wonder what a certain scene is like for someone with color blindness or someone with macular degeneration. In fact, we can take such a stance not only towards others, but also towards ourselves: this is exactly what I do when I reflect on my experience of the distance between the display of my computer and the window.

Taking a stance is always taking a stance towards someone or something. While Robbins and Jack focus on the side of *adopting* the phenomenal stance, we shall be mainly concerned here with the phenomenon at which the stance is aimed. Just as the physical stance and the intentional stance single out different patterns in the world (Dennett, 1991a), so the intentional stance and the phenomenal stance may pick out different phenomena as well. When applied to perceptual experience, the phenomenal stance is aimed at the phenomenal character of the experience, and not necessarily at intentional content.

I suggest that the phenomena towards which the stances are directed do in fact differ. For while the intentional stance analyzes perceptual experience in terms of the objects of experience, the phenomenal stance is aimed at the way the perceiver is affected by these objects. In this sense, phenomenal character is a perceiver-centered notion, which contrasts with object-centered notions such as perceptual knowledge, which figure in the intentional stance. I take this difference in focus to be a key difference between the phenomenal stance and the intentional stance.

It should be emphasized that adopting the phenomenal stance towards someone need not produce the target experience for the one who adopts this stance: one need not suffer in order to recognize that others are in pain.<sup>7</sup> A characterization from the phenomenal stance of someone’s perceptual experience should provide an intuitive or theoretical grasp of the phenomenal character of someone’s experience, but it need not

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bentham, 1823 (second edition), footnote to chapter 17.

<sup>7</sup> As Robbins and Jack (2006) note, however, full-blooded empathy often involves sharing the phenomenal feel of the one we engage with. So our common empathic engagement goes beyond the core of the phenomenal stance.



put us in the other's first-person perspective. One should not suppose that adopting the phenomenal stance towards a bat allows us to experience what it is like to be a bat in the same way as the bat itself does.

Various authors have provided characterizations of phenomenal experience. A recent example is Evan Thompson's (2007) 'enactive' approach to the mind, which draws on the phenomenological tradition. From a different starting-point, Thomas Metzinger (2003) provides a representational analysis of the structure of subjective conscious experience. Within the domain of *perceptual* experience, however, the sensorimotor account is perhaps the most detailed and promising proposal, to which we will turn in the following section. By appealing to this proposal I aim to flesh out the phenomenal stance for perceptual experience.

#### **4. Perceptual phenomenology: a sensorimotor characterization**

When we adopt the phenomenal stance towards others, we see them as subjects of phenomenal experience. But how can we formulate more precisely what we can learn about others when we adopt this stance towards them? What do we focus on when we take this stance towards ourselves? The *sensorimotor account*, as proposed by Kevin O'Regan and Alva Noë, aims to account for the phenomenal character of perceptual experience (O'Regan & Noë, 2001). It forms a plausible candidate to provide grasp of the target of the phenomenal stance.<sup>8</sup> Let me explain the approach by means of a few examples.

By way of introducing the sensorimotor approach to perceptual experience, consider the following. When we do not move, changes in sensory input are required for the visual perception of movement in the environment. However, if we move our eyes in such a manner that they track the movement of an object against a neutral background, it is precisely because the input from the stimulus does *not* change that we can see that something moves. We can conclude that our ability to perceive movements in the environment is based on the specific relation between sensory input and motor action, the 'sensorimotor contingencies' or 'sensorimotor dependencies'. For only the combination of the signals relating to possible self-movement and signals relating to possible retinal changes provides the information regarding environmental movement. The sensorimotor account of perceptual experience claims that perception more generally builds on such sensorimotor dependencies. For example, also the perceptual experience of different colors, sounds, and shapes, all involve different sensorimotor dependencies (O'Regan & Noë, 2001).

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<sup>8</sup> We saw in the previous section that adoption of the intentional stance need not involve any commitment to hypotheses about the underlying mechanisms of perception. The definition of the phenomenal stance need not contain any reference to precise underlying mechanisms either: to adopt the phenomenal stance is simply to approach others as subject of phenomenal experience, taking an interest in the phenomenal character of this experience. Still, we need some terms in which the phenomenal character can be framed. When we conceive of experience as an embodied phenomenon, we may expect that the – perceiver-centered – phenomenal stance characterization of perception in one way or another appeals to the causal processes underlying perception. From this perspective, one might suggest that a phenomenal stance proposal generates a sensorimotor account in much the same way as an intentional stance proposal generates an account in terms of beliefs, desires, and the like.

I suggested in the section above that an account of the phenomenal character of experience will be an account in perceiver-centered terms. The sensorimotor approach offers such an account. Indeed, the key move of sensorimotor theory is to focus on the characteristic patterns of sensorimotor engagement that enable perceptual experience, rather than on the object of perception such as a perceived environmental movement. It does so not merely with the aim of addressing the causal preconditions of perceptual experience. By appealing to the dynamic patterns of sensorimotor engagement with the environment, the theory explicitly intends to characterize and explain the phenomenal character of experience (O'Regan & Noë, 2001; Hurley & Noë, 2003; O'Regan, Myin & Noë, 2005).

Now suppose that you look at an object at some distance from a background, say the display of your computer. You will be able to see that it is located at a certain distance from the background. You can estimate this distance, perhaps indicating it with your thumb and index finger, in which case your estimate could be quantified as approximately a certain number of centimeters. So far, your experience is treated from the object-centered intentional stance, in terms of the information provided by perception. But intuitively it seems that there is more to the experience of distance than the mere possession of this information. What does the phenomenal 'feel' of this distance consist in? How can we characterize this experience from the phenomenal stance?

According to the sensorimotor account, the experience of the distance between an object and its background derives from the specific way in which this distance is encountered. New information becomes available to the perceiver by the way in which sensory input changes as he or she moves, depending on the distances between object, perceiver, and background. The phenomenal 'feel' of a distance, which seems insufficiently addressed by mentioning the distance or the possession of information, may be better addressed in terms of the characteristic sensorimotor dependencies implied by the spatial situation. For the phenomenal character of experience, it is claimed, the patterns of sensorimotor engagement are what matter.<sup>9</sup>

Reflection on the feeling of softness may help to get an intuitive grasp of the matter. We clearly experience the softness of a sponge by the exploration of it, in which sensory stimulation changes in a characteristic way as a function of motor action. The sensorimotor approach focuses on the ways in which the perceiver is engaged with the soft object, rather than exclusively addressing the epistemically evaluable upshot of these encounters. As Erik Myin writes:

“Though softness is clearly grounded in material properties of objects, the *experience* of softness can only be understood by reflecting on how softness is apprehended. In the sensorimotor account, the experience of softness comes about through a specific pattern encountered in a sensorimotor exploration, including facts as that if one pushes on a soft object, it yields.” (Myin, 2003, p. 43)

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<sup>9</sup> This appeal to sensorimotor dependencies does not imply that one has to move in order to see (Cooke & Myin, *forthcoming*). For example, binocular vision enables the experience of the distance between figure and background, presumably without involving movement, but it does so only after binocular vision has been developed. It is because former encounters enable the implicit grasp of the distance-specific sensorimotor contingencies that one need not move to experience the distance.

The sensorimotor account similarly characterizes experiential differences between perceptual modalities (such as vision and touch) in terms of the characteristic differences in the patterns of sensorimotor dependencies (O'Regan & Noë, 2001; Hurley & Noë, 2003; O'Regan, Myin & Noë, 2005). On its account, what it is like to see differs from what it is like to feel to the extent that the patterns of sensorimotor dependencies differ. Characterizing these patterns is characterizing phenomenal experience, conceived as the perceiver's embodied engagement with its environment.

The sensorimotor account offers a natural way to characterize the object of the phenomenal stance. We saw that its perceiver-centered analysis captures aspects of perceptual experience that do not figure in the intentional stance. This becomes even clearer when, in the next section, we relate this view to the analysis of perception in terms of intentional content.

## 5. Character and content

A focus on the perceiver's embodied engagement with her environment may flow naturally from the concerns of the phenomenal stance. But how exactly does this perspective relate to the analysis in terms of intentional content? I will distinguish two views of this relation. On either view, a phenomenal stance allows us to address issues of perceptual experience that are untouched by intentional characterizations, such as the characterization in terms of perspectival properties and nonperspectival properties. I close the section by contrasting the analysis with intentionalism.

Consider the differences between visual perception and tactile perceptual experience. How does the phenomenal stance towards these experiences differ from the way in which the intentional stance treats them? Alva Noë writes:

“From the side of the object, what differentiates seeing and touching are their different objects (looks as opposed to feels, say). But from the side of the perceiver what differentiates seeing from touching are the different patterns of activity in which seeing and touching respectively consist.” (Noë, 2002, pp. 66-67)

Perceptual experiences can be identified both in terms of the objects of perception and in terms of the different patterns of activity they involve. When we take the intentional stance, we focus on the objects of perceptual experience, on what the experience is an experience *of*. The sensorimotor theory adds an analysis of experiencing in terms of the way in which the perceiver is engaged with his or her environment. Clearly this enhances the richness of our account of perceptual experience. But we may wonder whether the perceiver-centered analysis of the sensorimotor account on its own can do sufficient justice to the phenomenal ‘feel’ of having meaningful experiences, such as that we see a chair *as* a chair. May not the intentional content somehow be part of the phenomenal character of experience? According to Noë:

“What determines the quality of experience (...) is two-fold. First, there is *what* you experience (the representational content). And second, there is, roughly, what happens to you while you experience.” (Noë, 2002, p. 67)

There are two ways to read this claim. One is to take it as suggesting that there are two factors, which together compose the phenomenal character of experience: one factor is

the intentional (or ‘representational’) content; another factor is an *additional* bit of phenomenal character. On this reading, only part of the phenomenal character is provided by the perceiver-centered approach. The result is a hybrid conception of phenomenal character as consisting of intentional content plus something else (e.g. non-representational ‘sensational’ properties of experience). This would conform to Ned Block’s attribution of intentional content to phenomenal character, while claiming that phenomenal character ‘outruns’ this intentional content (Block, 1996).

The second reading is as follows. To claim that the phenomenal character of perceptual experience is partially ‘determined’ by what you experience is just to say that it *depends on* what there is to perceive. This is of course trivially true. But it is not to say that phenomenal character of experience partly *consists of* intentional content. Thus Noë’s quote above is fully compatible with the idea that the intentional content of experience does not figure in the phenomenal stance at all, at least not as co-constitutive part of the phenomenal character of experience.<sup>10</sup>

It seems to me that phenomenal character can plausibly be analyzed first and foremost as a matter of the process of encountering the environment, rather than as an amalgam of content and engagement. To account for the fact that we phenomenally experience chairs as chairs, we may then appeal to our former encounters with chairs, which shape our present way of engagement with our environments, providing it with significance. For the phenomenal character of experience, then, it is the mode of embodied engagement that counts, rather than the intentional object which we encounter.

For present purposes, however, the important thing is that either reading implies that the phenomenal character of experience can not be reduced to intentional content. Consider for example the experience of *perspectival properties* and *nonperspectival properties*, discussed in Section 2. The phenomenal stance analysis can easily be applied to the experience of these properties. While what we perceive can be for example the elliptical appearance of a coin or its roundness, what it is like to perceive these properties is at least partly a matter of the perceiver’s embodied engagement with the perceived object. The phenomenal character of experience lies at least in part in the specific way in which this information is acquired, rather than purely in the information itself.

Now let me contrast this analysis with intentionalism, which claims that phenomenal character supervenes on intentional content (e.g. Byrne, 2001; Dretske, 1995; Tye, 1995). According to this supervenience claim, a creature that acquires exactly the same intentional content by means of vision as by means of touch would thereby have experiences with the same phenomenal character. An interesting feature of the sensorimotor account, in contrast, is that it allows that the phenomenal character of experience may differ even if there is no difference in the intentional content of experience. For imagine a creature that acquires no extra information by means of touch than it would acquire by means of vision. For example it can see that there is a square of a certain size and orientation, but it could also acquire the very same knowledge by

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<sup>10</sup> Note that a perceiver-centered analysis may involve processes outside the body of the perceiver, insofar as they have impact on the perceiver. Cf. Clark (2008, p. 139): organism-centered does not imply organism bound. But while we may identify patterns of engagement as characteristic for interaction *with certain objects*, this provides no reason to include intentional content (that is, the intentional upshot of this encounter) within the phenomenal character of the perceptual experience.

means of touch. Since the sensorimotor account appeals to the processes through which the perceiver obtains perceptual knowledge, and given that vision and touch imply different sensorimotor patterns, the sensorimotor account allows that the phenomenal character of these two experiences may differ. It may differ despite the fact that there is no difference in the object of awareness, in the perceptual knowledge the perceiver possesses.

## 6. Conclusion

Focusing on perceptual experience, I aimed to explicate a third way between the extremes of qualophobia and qualophilia. I share the fundamental qualophilic conviction that the phenomenal character of experience is something that needs to be accounted for. I discussed the notion of the phenomenal stance, as introduced by Robbins and Jack (2006), arguing that the phenomenal character of experience forms a different explanatory target as compared with the intentional content of perceptual experience.

To adopt the phenomenal stance towards a system is to regard it as having phenomenal experience, and to take an interest in the phenomenal character of the system's (supposed) experience. There are two ways to approach the phenomenal stance. One is focussed at the adopting of the stance. From this perspective, Robbins and Jack (2006) argue that the dualistic tendencies in our thinking may partly result from the observers' 'Balkanized' brains, in which the adoption of different stances exclude each other. I approached the phenomenal stance in a complementary way, namely by focusing instead on the phenomenal character of experience at which the stance is aimed.

I suggested that this focus requires a perceiver-centered analysis of the process of experiencing. The sensorimotor account provides such an analysis. Rather than taking an exclusive interest in the epistemically evaluable upshot of perceptual encounters, it focuses on the patterns of dependency of sensory input on motor action that are causal preconditions for perception. It appeals to these patterns to provide a positive characterization of experiencing.

Although born from qualophilic worries, this phenomenal stance proposal at the same time respects one of the qualophobe's core beliefs. For the acknowledgement that phenomenal character and intentional content are different phenomena is accompanied by shunning 'extra ingredients' in the world over and above the processes that enable behavior and perceptual access. The phenomenal stance can thus be regarded as a further development of Dennett's qualophobic thinking on the intentional stance (1987), the personal stance (1978) and consciousness (1990b).

The kinship of the phenomenal stance proposal with Dennett's views is further underlined by considering its relation with Dennett's *heterophenomenology*. The aim of heterophenomenology is to connect experience and the natural sciences, accommodating the first-person point of view within a third-person framework (Dennett 1991b; 2003). The heterophenomenologist communicates with the subject in order to get a descriptive account of the subjective experience of the person, the subject's 'heterophenomenological world', before attempting to explain this

heterophenomenological world.<sup>11</sup> Given the commitment to taking the subject's reports seriously, without granting him or her absolute authority on the explanation of the experience, it is not surprising that O'Regan and Noë write: "It may be – indeed, it is likely – that our phenomenological analysis can be accommodated by heterophenomenology" (O'Regan & Noë, 2001, p. 1014).

The key point is that according to the phenomenal stance proposal, heterophenomenology should not be focused exclusively on intentional content. For on this proposal, beliefs about the phenomenal character of experience are not the same as beliefs about the intentional content of experience. This may not make it easier to apply the approach to naïve subjects, who may be naturally inclined to be directed at what the world is like rather than at what their experience is like. But this is not to say that it cannot be done. Indeed, as Dennett says, "The policy of training subjects (...) might in some circumstances heighten the powers of subjects to articulate or otherwise manifest their subjectivity to investigators" (Dennett 2003, p. 29).

While the intentional stance characterizes perceptual experience in object-terms, the phenomenal stance – as exemplified in the sensorimotor approach – provides a characterization in terms of the perceiver's embodied engagement with her environment. On this account, the phenomenal character of perceptual experience does not reduce to the possession of intentional content. This allows the phenomenal stance to reveal aspects of experience that are left out of intentional characterizations such as characterizations in terms perspectival properties and nonperspectival properties. In fact this proposal leaves open the possibility that the phenomenal character of experience may differ, even if there is no difference in intentional content. Importantly, on this proposal the phenomenal character of experience does not require *pukkah* 'extra ingredients' in the world over and above the processes that enable behavior and perceptual access. I suggest that the rejection of these 'extra ingredients' is acceptable exactly because it turns out that they are not necessary in an account of the phenomenal character of experience.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> As Dennett emphasizes: "Notice that when you are put in the heterophenomenologist's clutches, *you get the last word*. You get to edit, revise, and disavow *ad lib*, and so long as you avoid presumptuous *theorizing* about the causes or the metaphysical status of the items you report, whatever you insist upon is granted constitutive authority to determine what happens in your heterophenomenological world" (Dennett, 1991b, p. 96).

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