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An epistemic argument for liberalism about perceptual content

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ABSTRACT
This paper concerns the question of which properties figure in the contents of perceptual experience. According to conservatives, only low-level properties figure in the contents of perceptual experience. Liberals, on the other hand, claim that high-level properties, such as natural kind properties, artifacts, and even moral properties, can figure in the contents of perceptual experience. I defend a novel argument in favor of liberalism, the Epistemic Argument, which hinges on two crucial claims. The first is that many perceptual experiences of even neurotypical human beings can justify beliefs in high-level properties without providing justification for their low-level constituents. The second claim, roughly, is that any experience that alone provides (defeasible) justification for beliefs about some property \( p \), other things being equal, has \( p \) as part of its content. In short, certain perceptual experiences represent high-level but not low-level properties, which entails that liberalism is true.

1. Introduction

This paper concerns the question of which properties figure in the contents of perceptual experience. According to conservatives, only low-level properties such as shape, color, and edge properties can figure in the contents of perceptual experience.\(^1\) Liberals, on the other hand, claim that high-level properties, such as natural kind properties, artifacts, and even moral properties, can figure in the contents of perceptual experience.\(^2\) Much ink has been spilled on the dispute between conservatives and liberals, and no consensus has yet emerged.

In what follows, I attempt to make some steps toward breaking this stalemate by defending a novel argument in favor of liberalism, what I call the Epistemic Argument for Liberalism. The Epistemic Argument hinges on two crucial claims. The first is that many perceptual experiences of even neurotypical human beings can justify beliefs in high-level properties
without providing justification for their low-level constituents. The second claim, roughly, is that any experience that alone provides (defeasible) justification for beliefs about some property \( p \), other things being equal, has \( p \) as part of its content. In short, certain perceptual experiences represent high-level but not low-level properties, which entails that liberalism is true.

In section 1, I give the outline of the Epistemic Argument in more precision and detail, as well as discussing why it matters for the conservative/liberal debate. In sections 2 and 3, I defend the first premise by appeal to the recent empirical literature on the nature of face perception and the development of perceptual expertise more generally. In section 4, I turn to and defend the second premise. Finally, in section 5, I summarize what’s been shown.

2. The epistemic argument for liberalism

One important reason why the debate about the contents of perceptual experience matters is its potential epistemic upshot. If only low-level properties can be represented in perceptual experience, then some other epistemological bridge principle or justification-conferring mental process will be required to avoid skepticism about many run-of-the-mill beliefs about ordinary objects. Liberals, on the other hand, don’t need to provide any such bridge principle to avoid skepticism: If we visually experience the apple as such, the experience alone provides prima facie justification for the belief that there is an apple on the table.

If it could be established that some perceptual experience can, by itself, justify beliefs about high-level properties, then it could be established that liberalism is true. There’s a real risk here that any such argument would be question-begging, since it’s initially hard to see how the claim about high-level property justification could be supported without implicitly assuming liberalism. This fact may explain why such a strategy has not, to my knowledge, been attempted in the extant literature.

One way this could go is by claiming that there’s no clear explanation of how experiences could justify beliefs about ordinary objects unless high-level perception is possible. But this strategy runs into problems in light of the fact that conservatives have given sophisticated and plausible explanations as to how low-level perception, along with the right background theory, could easily justify ordinary object beliefs. This suggests a related approach that if it could be established that agents can have justified perceptual beliefs in high-level properties without perceptual experiences of the low-level constituent properties, then the traditional conservative explanations of moving from low-level perceptual experience to high-level belief could not get off the ground. This is the kind of argument I give
below. The Epistemic Argument given here exploits the epistemological difference between the two views without begging the question against conservatism, and in a way that blocks some plausible conservative rebuttals.

Here is the outline of the argument:

1. **Epistemic Premise**: If an experience \( e \) alone gives you defeasible justification to believe that \( p \), then \( e \) has the content that \( p \).
2. **Empirical Premise**: Some experiences alone provide defeasible justification to believe propositions involving high-level properties without providing defeasible justification to believe propositions involving the low-level properties that they supervene on.
3. Some experiences alone provide defeasible justification involving high-level properties. (From 2, Simplification)

Therefore,

4. **Liberalism**: Some experiences contain high-level properties as part of their content.

The two substantive premises here are the Epistemic Premise and the Empirical Premise. The Epistemic Premise is initially very plausible. Of course, that’s not to say that it is unassailable; a further defense of it occurs in section 5. I take it that the Empirical Premise will be much more contentious among liberals and conservatives alike. A defense of that premise, then, will take up the next and most substantive two sections of the paper. Briefly, the strategy is to appeal to empirical research on face perception and perceptual expertise which provides strong support for the Empirical Premise. I turn to that defense presently.

3. **High-level perception without low-level perception**

It’s widely assumed that if high-level properties are represented in some token perceptual experience, then the low-level properties that constitute those high-level properties must also be represented in that experience. Let’s call these low-level properties the *constituents* of the high-level property. In other words, both conservatives and liberals accept:

**Constituent Representation (CR)**. For any high-level property \( F \), if \( F \) is part of the content of some particular experience \( e \), then \( F \)'s constituents are also part of \( e \).

If CR is true, it’s difficult to see how the Empirical Premise could be true, at least in ordinary cases of perception. My strategy at present is to argue that we have good reason to believe that CR is false, since the balance of evidence supports the Empirical Premise.
Most human beings are incredibly good at recognizing faces. This ability manifests itself with respect to (a) identifying particular faces, (b) emotional expressions, and (c) gender of (cisgendered) faces. All of these manifestations involve, if not high-level perception, then an ability to read high-level information off of a diverse range of constituents. If CR were true, then in face perception, neurotypical human beings should have introspective access to the constituents that underwrite their experience of the face(s) in question. I now argue that this is not so. Holistic properties, or at least the ones I’ll be focusing on throughout, will on anyone’s view count as high-level properties. So if face perception involves perceiving holistic properties without constituents, the Empirical Premise is true.

The holistic nature of face perception has not been completely overlooked in the literature on perceptual representation. Ned Block, for example, argues that facial recognition is perceptual on the basis of adaptation effects in the perception of emotional expressions and differently scaled faces (2014). Combined with the claim that adaptation occurs in perceptual processing but not in cognition, he endorses the conclusion that these high-level properties (e.g., emotional expressions) are perceptually represented. Tyler Burge, in a response to Block, is more tentative and raises some concerns for Block’s argument. For example, adaptation could occur in high-level properties only as a result of the adaptation of some lower-level attributive properties (Burge, 2014, pp. 580–581).

While there is clearly a connection between Block’s argument (and Burge’s response) and the debate about the contents of perceptual experience, settling these issues won’t in turn settle the dispute we are concerned with at present. Block and Burge are concerned first and foremost with the divide between perceptual processing and cognition. Block only wants to establish that some aspects of face perception lie on the perceptual side of the perception/cognition divide. But even supposing that this is right, it remains an open question whether the face-related perceptual attributes are represented in perceptual experience or only in unconscious, implicit perceptual processing. This is why Burge can raise doubts about Block’s conclusions without denying any of the (experiential) data on adaptation. Similarly, even if face perception lies on the cognitive side of a perceptual/cognitive neurological joint carving, this wouldn’t settle the debate either. This is because it remains an open question whether perceptual experience, in the sense relevant to perceptual justification, perfectly tracks the neurological divide. Even if face identification lies on the cognitive side of a neurological divide, it may still provide regress-stopping justification, and thus play the role that those worried about the epistemology of perceptual experience have traditionally been worried about. In sum, despite the
connections between the Block/Burge debate and the question being addressed here, what we say about one will not entail any hard and fast conclusions about the others. I turn then, to some background on face perception that is more directly relevant to the question of perceptual experience.

Probably the most widely accepted view of face perception in the psychological literature is the configural model. According to the configural model, the features essential to face recognition are “the interrelationships between different feature positions and shape . . . (e.g., the distance between the eyes, position and shape of the nose in relation to the position and shape of the mouth, etc.)” (Calder, Young, Keanea, & Dean, 2000, p. 528). The “configural information” relevant to face identification is extremely subtle, as it needs to be if it is to succeed at giving us the ability to uniquely identify individuals based on quick glances (Calder et al., 2000, p. 528). On a second model proposed by Tanaka and Farah (1993, 2003; see also Richler, Tanaka, Brown, & Gauthier, 2008), faces are coded according to a template, which allows for “Gestalt representation,” “in which the constituent parts (eyes, nose, mouth, etc.) aren’t ‘explicitly represented’” (Calder et al., 2000, p. 528). The idea here is that once holistic features are read off of the lower-level features, those lower-level features disappear from perceptual experience. Admittedly, this is a counterintuitive idea, but it fits with much of the data below, and so is a view worth taking seriously. This contrasts with the configural model, according to which individual features play a role in facial recognition, although representing the individual features is not alone sufficient for representation of the whole.

Which one of these models is correct remains an open empirical issue. There is also the possibility, of course, that each model is true of different aspects of face recognition. But what they share is the importance of holistic perceptual processing in the act of recognizing faces and facial expressions. I’ll discuss three related pieces of data which provide evidence for holistic facial recognition without recognition of the lower-level properties. This data is all behavioral (involving subject’s reports in response to lab stimuli), but it supports the models above.

The first piece of evidence that face perception proceeds holistically involves having subjects look at a single face which is a composite of the top half of one recognizable face (or facial expression) with the bottom half of a distinct recognizable face (or facial expression). If faces and facial expressions are recognized by the use of something like holistic templates (a la Tanaka and Farah), then such a composite face should cause problems for subjects’ ability to recognize identity. This is just what occurs: subjects are prone to slower identifications and more errors in the identifications of the parts (Cottrell, Branson, & Calder, 2002;
Cottrell, Dailey, Padgett, & Adolphs, 2000). This has come to be called the “composite face effect” (Maurer, Le Grand, & Monloch, 2002). As Palmeri and Cottrell explain:

This form of holistic processing can be explained in terms of whole-face templates . . . Suppose the model is presented with George Bush’s face in the upper half of the input, and Al Gore’s face in the lower half of the input. If there is a template that preferably matches Al Gore’s face, it will be partially matched by the input, and so will fire at a reduced level and pass this activation on to later layers. However, there is no way for these later layers to ‘know’ what part of the input was matched – this template is voting for all of Al Gore’s face, including his eyes, and so there is interference in recognizing the top half of the input at George Bush. (2009, p. 230) 

The downstream experience available to the subject in these cases reflects the face’s identity in proportion to the amount of votes by all of the regions’ votes combined. But the particular votes of each region are informationally encapsulated from the downstream experience. So subjects will be able to say, for example, that a Bush/Gore composite face ‘sort of looked like Gore’, without being able to say which features in particular were Gore-like.

A second piece of evidence in favor of holistic processing is the part-whole recognition effect. The part-whole recognition effect involves subjects’ abilities in recognizing the identity of particular features of faces – namely, people are more accurate in identifying a feature in the context of an entire face vs. identifying the feature in isolation (Tanaka & Farah, 1993; Tanaka & Sengco, 1997). Furthermore, changing other features of the face – such as changing the distance between the eyes on a face where the task is to reidentify a nose – also affects subjects’ abilities to reidentify as well (Tanaka & Gordon, 2011). This suggests that identification of a part is more direct and accurate when it depends on identification of the whole face. Such an effect is not found for other ordinary objects, such as houses, or with scrambled faces.

Finally, when face perception is triggered, non-identifying specific features of faces – such as nondescript freckles – have been found to be more difficult to detect. This occurs even with extremely simple “faces,” for which “adults are 50% slower to detect a deviation in the curvature of one line if the lines are arranged to look like a smiling or a frowning face rather than arranged arbitrarily or as an inverted face” (Marurr et al., 2002, p. 257, citing Suzuki & Cavanagh, 1995). This seems to demonstrate that salient features of faces – emotional expression and identity – crowd out lower-level features in perceptual processing. This is not to say, of course, that the lower-level information is not initially part of the perceptual input; rather, it is to say that it
appears that the perceptual system discards this information in the process of selecting which information is relevant for further perceptual processing and thus what features end up represented in perceptual experience. And of course this isn’t to deny that agents can experience the low-level features by shifting their attention. Shifts in attention onto particular low-level features are surely possible.\(^{16}\)

The evidence for holistic processing in the case of face perception is robust. And it is worth stressing that each of the phenomena just discussed are specific to face perception (and possibly other domains of perceptual expertise). These effects do not extend to ordinary object perception. There can be no doubt that something special occurs in the perceptual processing of the organizing of human faces. From the standpoint of defending a principle like the Empirical Principle, it would be nice if it were true in a wider variety of cases than the special case of face perception. Recent work on perceptual expertise provides potential evidence that these results are true of perceptual experts (at least of certain domains) as well. However, the evidence here is mixed (Gauthier & Tarr, 2002; Gauthier, Williams, Tarr, & Tanaka, 1998; McKone & Kanwisher, 2005; McKone, Kanwisher, & Duchaine, 2007; Richler, Cheung, & Gauthier, 2011; Robbins & McKone, 2007). In short, it would be nice if we had straightforward evidence one way or another over whether the effects in face perception extended straightforwardly to all perceptual expertise. But this is a matter for the psychologists to continue sorting out.\(^{17}\)

Figure 1. The top half of both faces are identical, but they appear different because of holistic face processing. (Reprinted from Maurer et al.)
4. From the empirical data to the empirical premise: Against CR

The three effects of holistic face perception given above all provide some evidence against CR. Taken together, along with the fact that all CR seems to have going for it is its intuitive plausibility, we have good reason to reject CR.\(^\text{18}\)

Begin with the composite effect. The composite effect suggests that our experience of faces is holistic, in the sense that perception of the whole face is experientially prior to the perception of the parts. This is supported by the fact that subjects are more accurate at picking out who a composite face is made up of than which parts of the face are whose. In normal circumstances, once early perceptual processing of facial features triggers a face template of a particular person, the processing of the lower-level features drops off. This information doesn’t survive to make it into perceptual experience. This isn’t to say that the lower-level features can’t be perceived – consciously attending to such lower-level features could result in their being experienced. The claim being made here is that, barring some special shift in attentional focus, it seems as though face identity gets into perceptual experience despite the fact that the constituents do not.

The part-whole recognition effect supports a similar conclusion. Subjects more easily identify, for example, Bill Clinton’s nose when presented in the context of Bill Clinton’s face (as compared to Clinton’s face with a different nose). This suggests that the whole of faces is (experientially) represented prior to the parts. Presumably, when subjects see Clinton with his own nose vs. Clinton with someone else’s nose, they are able to distinguish the real Clinton by which face fits more into their Clinton template. Presented in isolation, Clinton’s nose is more difficult to recognize since there is no complete template from which to compare the noses to. Again, it seems as though the whole is experienced independently of its constituents.\(^\text{19}\)

However, there is an alternative explanation of the composite effect and the part-whole recognition effect that is compatible with CR. Consider a composite face constructed out of Bill Clinton and Al Gore. A subject may perceive the face as Gore-like, but none of the individual features of the face as Gore-like. However, on this alternative interpretation, this isn’t because the individual features are not represented in perceptual experience; rather, it is that they are not represented as Gore-like.\(^\text{20}\) On such a view, although the constituents of the high-level Gore-like perception are represented in experience, what isn’t represented is that they are the constituents of the Gore-like representation. If they were represented in such a way, the subject would be able to report which features of the face are Gore-like and which are not.
This objection relies on the distinction between *perceiving* vs. *perceiving-as*. On this alternative interpretation of the data, subjects see Bill Clinton’s eyes, but they don’t recognize them as Clinton’s eyes. This means that the low-level properties remain part of the perceptual experience, even if there is no recognition concept attached to them. For similar reasons, it can probably also explain the part-whole effect in face perception. Not being able to recognize eyes that look a certain way as Clinton’s eyes is compatible with seeing that they look a certain way. So let us turn to a final piece of evidence in favor of holistic face perception.

The final piece of evidence is the reduced ability to distinguish features which are irrelevant to face identification. Because this is the piece of evidence that will separate my favored explanation from the alternative given in the previous paragraph, it is worth discussing in a bit more detail. This kind of study of faces has as its precursor a study of identifying letters within words by John Millsbaugh (1978). In this study, Millsbaugh asked participants to assess whether a grouping of letters had all the same letter, or whether it contained a mixture of different letters. He found that judgments of different letters took more time when the letters were arranged in an organized pattern (such as a diamond or an X) in comparison to one in which they were arranged randomly (Mermelstein, Banks, & Prinzmetal, 1979).22

Mermelstein et al. (1979) performed a similar study on the identification of a single feature on non-faces, scrambled faces, and unscrambled faces (Experiment 2, see p. 475 for the faces used). Participants were first shown a target feature, such as an oval or a diamond. They were asked to report whether the feature was present in the figure (unscrambled or scrambled faces or non-faces) shown immediately after. Subjects took more time identifying the presence of the feature in unscrambled faces than the other two stimuli – again suggesting holistic processing. Interestingly, Mermelstein and colleagues also showed that this effect disappeared in cases where detection involved memory, rather than in a more directly perceptual task. As they say:

If the task requires perceptual analysis of the array, good forms can hinder detection of one of their parts, as though they camouflaged it. On the other hand, if the task requires memory of the array, the same good forms can help detection of a part, possibly because unitary forms are remembered better than disorganized ones or because “camouflaging” does not operate in encoded memory in the same way as in perception. (1979, p. 478)

In a related study, Suzuki and Cavanagh (1995) assessed whether this effect held for very simple figures, such as lines curving up or down (p. 908). The results were similar – participants were slower to detect the target line when the lines were arranged into rudimentary faces than when arranged randomly.
This suggests that the processing of faces is arguably mandatory – subjects were not able to ignore the faces even when it would be task advantageous.23 All of this suggests that face identity is experienced unaccompanied by experiences of its constituents. As Suzuki and Cavanagh (1995) note, it appears that “global representation dominates during speeded pattern discrimination, obscuring or preempting the lower-level representations of the constituent parts; in other words, only global representation is ‘visible’ to the rapid discrimination process (p. 911).” Again, it seems as though once identification is made (prior to perceptual experience), processing of the lower-level features drops off.

Let’s now return to the two hypotheses discussed above. On my favored view, high-level properties are often and first experienced in face perception without the representation of its low-level constituents. In other words, CR is false. On the alternative sketched above, it isn’t that the low-level constituents are not perceptually experienced. Rather, it is only that there are some high-level concepts (such as being-Clinton) that do not have low-level counterparts (being-Clinton’s-nose). On this view, Clinton’s nose is still represented, but not represented as such. Both hypotheses can adequately explain the first two pieces of evidence. However, it’s difficult to see how this alternative interpretation can explain why low-level features take longer to detect. Our third piece of evidence for holistic processing seems to indicate that special attention – that is, task-specified shifts in attention – are required to perceptually experience these low-level features. And this task doesn’t rely on perceiving as in the sense relevant to the objection above, since recognizing edges and curvature of lines doesn’t require sophisticated concepts. Only the hypothesis that CR is false can straightforwardly capture all three pieces of evidence.

This response being given, I wholly grant that things are murky here and that future empirical data will put further pressure on some views – be it my interpretation which involves rejecting CR, or some alternative. But given where things stand now, I think that we have good – even if not conclusive – reason to think that CR is false, at least with respect to face perception. Note, this is not to say that face perception doesn’t involve the representation of any low-level properties. Face perception may involve the representation of some generic low-level properties about the general shape of the face and related features. What is important about the rejection of CR is that it does not represent enough low-level features to constitute the high-level identifying properties (e.g., being Gore-like, or angry-looking).24 And though it’s less clear whether this may extend to the recognition of objects within one’s perceptual expertise, it’s at least open that it does. And the same evidence that supports the rejection of CR provides support for the Empirical Premise. Our perceptual systems appear to be set up such that, at least sometimes, low-level information
processing drops off after high-level concepts are triggered but prior to the generation of perceptual experience.

There is one objection worth briefly considering. One may be happy to grant that face processing is holistic. But what reason do we have to believe it’s perceptual, rather than cognitive? And if it is cognitive, then it is irrelevant to the question of the contents of perceptual experience. I think there are at least three things telling against this interpretation. First, the evidence canvassed above tentatively shows that high-level properties are (sometimes) experienced more directly than low-level properties. It would be prima facie surprising if perceptual experience was less directly accessible than cognition. Second, as noted above, holistic face processing is mandatory and informationally encapsulated, itself thought to be a mark of the perceptual. Finally, recall that in Mermelstein et al.’s (1979) study, the effect in question disappeared if the task involved memory, suggesting that the holistic effect is not a result of a non-perceptual process like memory. Again, none of this is conclusive, but it does seem to shift the burden onto the defender of the cognitive view of holistic face perception.

Suppose the argument just given is successful. Then CR is false. If we can represent things like face identity and emotional expression in perceptual experience, then we do so without representing the constituents of those properties in experience. That means that insofar as we can be justified in beliefs about face identity and emotional expressions on the basis of perceptual experience, it won’t be because that experience represents low-level constituent properties. There will be experiences for which we have (defeasible) justification for high-level beliefs (e.g., that face looks like Gore’s) when we don’t have (defeasible) justification for the beliefs about the low-level constituent properties (e.g., that is Gore’s nose). Thus, we have good reason to think that the Empirical Premise is true.

5. The epistemic premise

The epistemic argument for liberalism involves two substantive premises. So far, I’ve defended what I’ve called the Empirical Premise. Now I turn to the Epistemic Premise:

**Epistemic Premise.** If an experience e alone gives you defeasible justification to believe that p, then e has the content that p.

The Epistemic Premise is initially very plausible. Intuitively, the sorts of propositions that an experience can justify should reflect the content of that experience, at least in some way. The Epistemic Premise encompasses one very straightforward way of generalizing this point.
However, Nico Silins gives a purported counterexample to the premise based on similarity:

When I look at the clear blue sea, my experience makes it manifest to me not just of that blue, but also that [that blue is more similar to purple than it is to yellow].

Reflection on my experience here can make the proposition about color similarity obvious to me, without my relying on further background beliefs. (2013, p. 29)

There are two ways to fill out Silins’ case. On the first, all of the colors being compared are present within the subject’s perceptual experience. So, for example, perhaps the subject has the blueness of the water, the yellowness of the sand, and the purpleness of an orchid all within her visual field at once. It’s difficult to see why, on this way of filling out the case, the similarity relations between the colors wouldn’t themselves be represented within the experience itself.\(^{27}\) The blueness of the water and the purpleness of the orchid do plausibly appear similar to the subject. Even Byrne, whom Silins cites in support of his claim, agrees.\(^ {28}\) So on this way of filling out the case, there is no clear counterexample to be had.

On a second way of filling out the case, the visual experience in question is merely of one color, such as the blue sea. This experience alone is purported to justify the belief that that color (pointing at the blue sea) “is more similar to purple than it is to yellow” (Silins, 2013, p. 29).\(^ {29}\) How could an experience of a single color alone justify a belief like this? We would need further knowledge about the appearance of purple and yellow to do this work. This can be shown by considering someone who had never seen purple or yellow, and yet still formed this belief based on an experience of the blue sea. Such a belief would be clearly unjustified.\(^ {30}\) Either way, then, Silins’ purported counterexample to the Epistemic Premise is put into doubt. Barring some forthcoming argument, then, we should tentatively accept the Epistemic Premise.

6. Conclusion

I’ve argued that empirical evidence, along with plausible epistemological principles, provides strong reason to believe that perceptual expertise, in particular face perception, involves the perception of high-level properties. How far this argument extends, if successful, remains a question for further research. However, it would provide a significant marker of progress in the debate between conservatives and liberals about perceptual experience – progress in favor of at least a constrained version of liberalism.
Notes

1. The philosophy of perception literature, like much of the empirical literature, has historically been focused on visual perception. This is, of course, unfortunate in many ways, only one of which is that I know of no discussion of what the low-level properties of other modalities might be. But presumably, if the conservative/liberal debate is to generalize, the low/high-level property debate will extend to other domains. I here focus on the visual case because the empirical data I use in support is clearest in the visual case.


3. Granted, the name ‘Empirical Premise’ here is misleading. This premise concerns conditions on justification, and thus is also epistemological. I call it the Empirical Premise both to distinguish it from the Epistemic Premise, as well as because the support for the premise is largely empirical in nature.

4. An anonymous referee pointed out to me that those who favor the view that perceptual representation has a language-like, propositional format may reject this claim. This strikes me as right, and for this reason, it seems that the arguments of this section are unnecessary for proponents of such a view.

5. Things are a bit trickier here then explicated in the text, since there may be layers of constituents. So some high-level properties may be partly constituted by other high-level properties which are themselves in turn constituted by low-level properties. Since these layers of constituents would significantly complicate things without altering the argument, I set this complication aside in what follows.

6. Non-ordinary cases may provide space for disagreement. For example, perhaps one could have a perceptual experience in which they had a defeater for the presence of the constituents without having a defeater for the high-level property being constituted. It’s a bit difficult to see how this would work, but I don’t want to rule out that it could happen; philosophers cleverer than me could surely come up with possible cases. As I’m trying to establish not just the possibility of high-level perception but its actuality among normal human beings in normal circumstances, I set these cases aside in what follows.

7. Things are tricky in the case of gender, because researchers have not sufficiently considered gender nonconforming individuals. But it seems plausible that there would be some evolutionary reason to develop a system of quickly identifying gender/sex in other individuals, even if such a mechanism makes systematic errors with respect to some groups of individuals. (Unfortunately, and as evidenced by the world we live in, evolution doesn’t select against mechanisms that can contribute to oppressive institutions.) It’s worth noting that none of my arguments below rely on our ability to reliably perceive gender based on perception of face alone.

8. This claim relies on an assumption that could be questioned, but which I won’t be defending here: That the contents of neurotypical agents’ perceptual experiences are at least normally accessible to them upon introspection. (See Schwitzgebel, 2014, 4.2.3 for some considerations and constraints.)

9. To be clear, I don’t want to rule out that an argument for high-level perceptual experience on the basis of adaptation effects could be given. In fact, Block may himself accept such an argument (See also Helton, 2016, section 4.2). But it is a separable issue from the one explicitly addressed by Block and Burge.
10. Indeed, at least Burge seems to be committed to the claim that the question being addressed in the present paper is, in some sense, uninteresting. See Burge (2014, p. 583).

11. See, for example, Carey and Diamond (1977), Diamond and Carey (1986), Bruce, Doyle, Dench, and Burton (1991), and Rhodes (1988).

12. It’s also worth noting that such a view is compatible with quick shifts in attention which result in lower-level features being represented. This is one way that the initial counterintuitiveness of the theory could be mitigated.

13. Arguably, the fact that the data in question is behavioral is ideal for the purposes of the argument, since the claims I am making involve what is experientially available to neurotypical human beings in the process of seeing faces.

14. For an example of this phenomenon, see Figure 1.

15. See Figure 1 for an example of this phenomenon.

16. This helps to explain why subjects can succeed at the task, even if more slowly. In a way, the fact that subjects can alter the properties represented in their perceptual experience by shifting their attention makes assessing what they’re representing in one particular experience more difficult. If reaction times for some property are slower, is that because the property wasn’t represented in an initial perceptual experience and was only revealed upon a shift in attention? Or is it just that experience represents a wide array of properties, some of which require reflection to access? I know of no empirical evidence that tells one way or another on this question, unfortunately. (I thank an anonymous referee for pointing out this ambiguity.)

17. Fish (2013) and Bayne (2016) give several reasons for thinking of gist perception (perceptual expertise) as properly perceptual: First, expertise perception is extremely quick (recognition for exposure times as short as 20ms), it requires very little focal attention, it plays an important role “in directing and guiding perceptual processing” (Bayne 2016, p. 5, citing Bar, 2004), and expert perception is subject to adaptation effects (see also the discussion above on Block, 2014). I am sympathetic to these considerations (or at least the latter three), but leave a discussion of them out of the text for reasons of space. To lay my cards on the table, I am inclined to think that properly perceptual expertise does exist, at least in some domains. But I wholly admit that this is an unsettled empirical issue.

18. A reminder: Showing that CR is false isn’t yet to show that the contents of perceptual experience can be liberal. As noted above, conservatives also accept CR – they just further claim that the antecedent of CR is never met, since high-level properties are never perceptually represented.

19. A similar worry could be pressed against this interpretation that was presented with respect to the composite face phenomenon; that is, that the parts of Clinton’s face may be represented even if they aren’t represented as Clinton’s. I address this at the end of the section.

20. I thank an anonymous referee for pointing out this possibility to me.

21. This objection comes from conversations with and, as well as from an anonymous referee, though I have formulated it in a distinct way to fit the terminology of this paper. I hope not to have lost track of the objection in the process.

22. Millsbaugh calls them “good” vs. “bad” configurations.

23. See Palmero and Rhodes (2007) for more on this point.

24. I thank an anonymous referee for urging me to make this more clear.
25. For evidence of this, see Palmeri and Rhodes (2007). For informational encapsulation and mandatory processing as a mark of the perceptual, see Fodor (1983, 2007), Burge (2010), and Block (2014).

26. Notice the role of “alone” in the Epistemic Premise, as it rules out experiences that justify certain beliefs only when coupled with other background knowledge.

27. Things may be more complicated here, since getting a grip on the similarity between two or more colors within one’s visual field may involve shifts of attention. And these shifts in attention may result in shifts in the contents experienced. But this complication tells against Silins, not in favor. For if shifts in attention result in shifts in the contents experienced, then no single experience serves to justify the similarity belief – only some combination of perceptual experiences could do the work, and so the counterexample would lose its force.


29. I think this interpretation of Silins’ purported counterexample is more likely to be what he has in mind, given the passage in Byrne he cites in support.

30. Perhaps Silins’ thought here is that, while previous purple and yellow experiences would be required to form a justified belief, these experiences are only necessary to provide us with the concepts required to do justificatory work, not to actually do justificatory work themselves. (Compare: We need experience to get the concepts of BACHELOR and UNMARRIED MAN, but nonetheless the belief that [all bachelors are unmarried] may be independent of experience [a priori] in the relevant sense.) But if this is right, then it’s also unclear why we should think the experience of the blue sea is doing any justificatory work either, rather than just providing us with the concept of a particular shade of blue. In this case, then, the justification for the belief is wholly a priori, though deceptively so since the triggering conditions for the concept’s grounds have just been met.

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