



Husserl and Disjunctivism Revisited

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Abstract

In a recent series of important papers, Søren Overgaard has defended a disjunctivist reading of Edmund Husserl's theory of perception. According to Overgaard, Husserl commits to disjunctivism when arguing that hallucination intrinsically differs from perception because only experiences of the latter kind carry singular content and, thereby, pick out individuals. This paper rejects that interpretation by invoking the theory of intentionality developed by Husserl in the *Logical Investigations*. It is claimed that this theory not only lacks the notion of singular content, but it also entails the idea that perceptions and hallucinations belong to the same kind of experience. If that is correct, a commitment to conjunctivism on Husserl's end follows, *pace* Overgaard.

Keywords Conjunctivism · Perceptual content · Disjunctivism · Edmund Husserl · Perception

1 Introduction

Edmund Husserl's theory of perception has attracted a substantial amount of interest over the past decades. Among other issues, relevant scholarship has focused on where to position Husserl's theory within the logical space opened up by contemporary philosophy of perception and, in particular, whether that theory should qualify as 'conjunctivist' or 'disjunctivist.' As an approximation, the debate is divided in two

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main camps. Some have claimed that Husserl's theory is a form of conjunctivism, while others have argued that it qualifies as a form of disjunctivism.¹

Before moving ahead, it might be important to briefly clarify how the terms of 'conjunctivism' and 'disjunctivism' are understood within this debate: not only are these two terms alien to the technical vocabulary of classical phenomenology, they also, within contemporary literature, no longer denote univocal positions about the nature of perceptual experience, but rather clusters of theories. Note that, in line with the debate I am tackling here, the characterization of these two positions only focuses on visual perceptions and hallucinations but ignores perceptions of different sensory types, illusions, and so-called 'veridical hallucinations' (Overgaard 2023: 506, fn 22).

According to conjunctivism, as it is understood in this paper, veridical perceptual experiences ('perceiving') and falsidical perceptual experiences ('hallucinating') belong to the very same kind of experience. Conjunctivists hence endorse what is sometimes called 'the common factor principle' (Fish, 2010: 3): each perception has, at least in principle, a hallucination as its indiscriminable or indistinguishable counterpart, with which it shares the same kind. Because they share the same kind, a perception of *o* and the indiscriminable hallucination of *o* are qualitatively identical experiences. However, they arguably are different experiences and, on the view under consideration, their difference is to be spelled out in terms of truth and falsity of a conjunction (hence the label 'conjunctivism'). Accordingly, my perceptual experience of an object *o* is veridical if, and only if, the conjunction.

(1) I live through the perceptual experience of *o* and *o* exists.

is true. In this case, which is sometimes labelled as the 'good' case, one can say that the subject 'perceives *o*.' By contrast, my perceptual experience of an object *o* is falsidical if, and only if, the conjunction (1) is false, where the falsity of the conjunction derives from the falsity of the second conjunct ('*o* exists'). In this case, which is the 'bad' case, one can say that the subject hallucinates *o*.

According to disjunctivism, as it is understood in this paper, perceiving and hallucinating do not belong to the same kind of experience, as the conjunctivist claims.² Disjunctivists hence reject the common factor principle: even though a perception of *o* has, at least in principle, an indiscernible hallucination of *o* as its counterpart, the

¹ Defenses of the conjunctivist interpretation can be found in Bower, 2020, Romano, 2012; Smith, 2016 (though Husserl is not explicitly labelled by J. Smith as 'conjunctivist'). Representatives of the disjunctivist interpretation include: Hopp, 2011 and, 2020; Overgaard, 2018, 2020, 2023; A. D. Smith, 2008. This only is a quick review of the literature, however. For instance, other authors contend that Husserl's position about perception is unique and cannot be neatly subsumed under either of these two labels (see Drummond, 2012, Staiti, 2015, Zahavi, 2017). Furthermore, it has also been maintained that Husserl's theory develops within a conceptual framework that is not commensurable to the one at stake in contemporary debates on perception because it proceeds from the perspective of the phenomenological reduction (see Cimino, 2021, Doyon, 2022; for a discussion of this view, see Bower, 2023).

² The variant of disjunctivism under discussion hence is metaphysical disjunctivism. More specifically, it is a variant of disjunctivism that grounds the difference in kind between perception and hallucination in a difference in kind between the contents borne by these experience (Fish, 2010: 91f); for it is held that only perception, not hallucination, carries singular content, as Sect. 2 clarifies.

two experiences belong to two distinct kinds and, thus, are not qualitatively identical. They belong to distinct kinds for the following reason. The nature of perceiving is relational: since relations, to exist, demand the existence of their relata, and since the nature of perception is relational, one lives through a perception only if its object *o* exists. By contrast, hallucination does not belong to the same psychological kind of perception because this experience is not relational: the experience exists precisely when its object does not. Consequently, if I hallucinate *o*, then I live through some experience as of *o*, which does not belong to the same psychological kind of perception. Against this backdrop, the good and the bad case are spelled out in terms of a disjunction (hence the label ‘disjunctivism’):

(2) either I perceive *o* or I hallucinate *o*.

The truth of the first disjunct characterizes the good case, while the truth of the second characterizes the bad case (Fish, 2010: 88).

This clarification explains the terminology adopted in the paper (Overgaard, 2013: 52 fn2; 2018: 27): the term ‘perception’ is always used with a successful connotation to refer to an attitude that grasps its object, as it were. And, to come back to Husserl’s theory of perception, the question at the center of the debate addressed by this paper is whether Husserl endorses the view that ‘perception’ denotes a perceptual experience that is veridical, alongside hallucination as a perceptual experience that is falsidical (so argues the conjunctivist). Or rather, whether he endorses the view that ‘perception’ is co-extensive with ‘perceptual experience’³ and, hence, that perception essentially or intrinsically differs from hallucination (so argues the disjunctivist).

This debate has originated in a paper by A.D. Smith (2008), which advances a disjunctivist interpretation of Husserl. A.D. Smith’s arguments have been the critical target of an article by Bower (2020), where a conjunctivist interpretation is defended. The main aim of this paper is to provide further ammunition to the conjunctivist reading of Husserl’s theory of perception by criticizing arguments developed in the last iteration of this exchange. This last iteration consists of a series of insightful, lucid, and stringently argued articles by Søren Overgaard (2020, 2023), which support a disjunctivist reading *contra* Bower’s article of 2020. Before getting into the details of Overgaard’s interpretation, however, I should make two important caveats, which constrain the scope of my claim, but also delimit its results.

Of these two caveats, the first one is more important from a systematic point of view. The paper zooms in only on Overgaard’s arguments in favor of a disjunctivist reading, meaning that it disregards other arguments provided to that effect in the literature and especially those developed by A.D. Smith in his article of 2008. While I do consider Bower’s rebuttal of A.D. Smith convincing, the paper does not review this segment of the debate and hence is at least in principle open to the possibility of Husserl’s position to count as disjunctivist based on considerations raised elsewhere

³ This formulation is contingent on an important simplification: as already mentioned, the paper is not concerned with illusions as perceptual errors that are different from hallucinations. Depending on how one understands illusions, these experiences might be argued to be perceptual in nature, but not coincident with perceptions (in which case, ‘perceptual experience’ expresses a more general concept, which is not co-extensive with that of ‘perception’ as it also encompasses illusions).

by A.D. Smith and other authors (e.g., see Hopp, 2011, 2020). Suppose this is the case, that is, suppose that systematic considerations raised by other authors in other publications speak in favor of a disjunctivist take on Husserl's theory of perception. Even then, the paper will have achieved a significant result: it would have confined the range of considerations that are available to the disjunctivist camp by putting Overgaard's arguments to rest.

The second caveat concerns the historical horizon of my (counter-)interpretation. The scholars participating in this exchange have so far adopted a bird's-eye perspective in upholding their opposite readings of Husserl by relying on references to Husserl's earlier and later texts. This paper's perspective is admittedly narrower as it will only be focusing on Husserl's theory of perception as this is presented in the *Logical Investigations*⁴ (and in immediately adjacent years: mainly the course of 1904/05 on *Wahrnehmung und Aufmerksamkeit* and the one of 1907 on *Ding und Raum*). The paper, therefore, basically disregards Husserl's later texts and defends a conjunctivist reading only for Husserl's early view of perception. In other words, I will not take a stance on Husserl's later position and, thus, I will not exclude the possibility for Husserl's later view on perception to warrant the label of 'disjunctivist.'

While this historical restriction results in a partial treatment of Husserl's theory of perception, I contend that it retains some important merits. For suppose my conjunctivist interpretation of the early Husserl is correct and suppose further that Overgaard's interpretation *contra* Bower stands for the later Husserl. Even then, the present paper will have achieved three results. First, it will have rectified how to read a part of Husserl's theorizing about perception. Second, it will have highlighted a substantial change in Husserl's philosophy of perception throughout the years. Third, it will also have advanced the debate in an important way: one would not be allowed to speak of 'Husserl's theory of perception' *tout court* or in general anymore, as it is routinely done in this debate, but future discussions on the topic will have to restrict themselves on a specific variant of Husserl's phenomenology.

This is the plan ahead. I start by presenting Overgaard's interpretation in Sect. 2. I then contrast this interpretation with my own reading of the *Logical Investigations* (hereafter 'LI') in Sect. 3. I put forward the thesis that Husserl was a conjunctivist about perception in the 4th section and I briefly wrap up in Sect. 5.

2 Husserl's Disjunctivism

Overgaard's interpretation is set in motion by an informative comparison between perception and sensory imagination (what Husserl calls '*Phantasie*'). By relying on extensive textual evidence coming from various places of Husserl's *corpus*, Overgaard addresses especially three properties that set the two experiences apart.

⁴ There are important differences between the first and the second edition of the *Logical Investigations* (see Panzer 1986: XXIX-LXV, Smith and Mulligan, 1986, Drummond, 1990: 26–45). However, these differences do not appear to impact, in any substantial sense, the theory of perception that is presented therein. In this paper I will, therefore, appeal to the *Logical Investigations* without further qualification.

Let us consider perceptions first. A first remarkable property of this experience is that the object is given to it in the flesh or *in propria persona* (*leibhaftig*). As far as I know, Husserl in his work only gives ostensive definitions of what he means by *Leibhaftigkeit*: he often tells his audience that, when we live through a perception, “the object stands in perception as there in the flesh, it stands, to speak still more precisely, as actually present, as self-given there in the current now” (Husserl, 1973, Hua 16: 14, Eng. trans. 12).

A second important feature of perception is the possibility for the selfsame object to be targeted by different perceptions. Husserl writes:

if we transition from a perception of the desk, as this results from one viewpoint, to another perception, which belongs to another viewpoint, or if the table is turned in front of our eyes, so the consciousness [of] ‘the selfsame desk [*derselbe Tisch*]’ emerges (Husserl, 2004, Hua 38: 16).⁵

How is it possible for different perceptual experiences to target the selfsame object? Overgaard argues that this is explained by the third property of perception: when a subject perceives something, they are confronted with *individual* objects. The desk is one, i.e., one single individual object—entirely determined in all its properties, having “determined careers in time and space,” and for which multiple occurrence is excluded (Overgaard, 2023: 503). In grasping an individual object, the experience is, by the same token, targeting an existing object, for only existing objects are spatio-temporal individual objects: “Husserl’s main argument is that [...] only objects that actually exist are individuals” (Overgaard, 2023: 503).

Based on the last two considerations, Overgaard concludes that perception ‘picks out an individual.’ One can read that:

genuine perceptual experience, on Husserl’s view, does not merely present something with such-and-such features as being instantiated in this or that spatial location—where any number of distinct individuals could in principle fit the bill. Rather, Husserl thinks, perceptions pick out *individuals* (Overgaard, 2023: 502).

It is clear from Overgaard’s train of thought that ‘picking out’ is used in a factive sense: to pick out an individual entity is to become acquainted with that entity. When sketching the disjunctivist position he attributes to Husserl, he writes that “the veridical experience [...] makes you aware of or ‘acquaints’ you with an existing physical object” (Overgaard, 2018: 29) and he construes acquaintance as a relation by referring to Bertrand Russell’s understanding of that notion (2018: fn 8, Russell, 1917: 209f).

The idea that veridical perceptual experience picks out individuals and, thus, has a relational nature is rendered by Overgaard in terms of perception carrying singular content: “I shall take it as established that Husserl holds genuine perceptual experiences to have singular contents” (Overgaard, 2023: 503). The notion of ‘singular

⁵ Unless stated otherwise, all translations from German are mine.

content,' as we will see, is the horse pulling the cart of Overgaard's disjunctivist interpretation and it is one I will discuss extensively in the next section.

Let us now turn the attention to *Phantasie* or sensory imagination (hereafter: just 'imagination'). Imagination is an experience characterized precisely by the fact that it lacks *Leibhaftigkeit*. When I imagine a desk, the desk does not appear to me as being there, in front of me, present; for it rather is precisely that: imagined (Husserl, 2004, Hua 38: 346, see also Hua 16: 15)! Imagination is different also with respect to the other two properties highlighted about perception.

Suppose I imagine a brown Cocobolo desk at t , and then I imagine again a brown Cocobolo desk at t' —have I imagined one and the same Cocobolo desk? This question has no answer in the case of imagination. It has no answer simply because it makes no sense to raise that question about imagination to begin with. The question cannot be given application to imagination because it is impossible for imagination to be directed towards individual objects. Why is it impossible for imagination to target individuals? Overgaard answers the question by referring to Husserl, when he writes that:

Husserl's main argument is that objects of imagination are nonexistent, and only objects that actually exist are individuals. An imagined object "is nothing, nothing actual [*nichts Wirkliches*], not an individual. For, stated simply, a concrete individual is an actual individual [*wirkliches Individuum*] and actually exists in this or that mode of actuality" (*Phantasy* 608) (Overgaard, 2023: 503).

To elaborate, since it is not possible for the selfsame object to be targeted by different acts of imagination, imagination does not share the second property that characterizes perception. Further, different acts of imagination cannot target the selfsame object because imagination does not pick out individuals (and this impossibility is explained by the facts that imagination does not pick out existing objects and that only existing objects are individual). Accordingly, imagination does not share the third property of imagination either. For all these reasons, Overgaard maintains, consistently with his previous formulation, that imagination does not carry singular content (2023: 505).

Armed with the comparison between these two experiences, Overgaard then considers the case of hallucination. We are told that hallucination is a Janus-faced experience. On the one hand, hallucination resembles perception insofar as hallucination, too, is accompanied by *Leibhaftigkeit* (Hua 16: 16; Overgaard, 2023: 502). When I hallucinate a black king cobra on my desk, then I have the sense that the cobra is there, in the flesh, in front of me.⁶ However, hallucination also resembles imagina-

⁶ A side note on this: the fact that hallucinations are accompanied by *Leibhaftigkeit* shows that this is not a doxastic quality (Hua 16: 16). To put this another way, an experience is *leibhaftig* not because it is accompanied by the belief that the object is there, present to the subject. The point can be illustrated by the fact that hallucinations retain *Leibhaftigkeit*, even when the subject comes to believe that the object of the attitude does not exist (e.g., in remembering to have taken LSD, I come to believe that there is no black cobra on my desk, even though the object still appears to be there, present to me). This idea is amplified on by Jaspers in his early work on hallucinations, see Jaspers, 1963. Further on *Leibhaftigkeit*, see Conrad, 1911.

tion because hallucination, as imagination, does not share the other two properties of perception.

Overgaard begins by noting that it is impossible for different acts of hallucination to target the selfsame object (Overgaard, 2023: 508). Suppose I hallucinate a black king cobra at time t and then I hallucinate a black king cobra again at time t' . Is it the same cobra that I am hallucinating? The question has no answer because the question is nonsensical. And the question makes no sense because it is simply not in the power of hallucination to target individual objects. As Overgaard writes:

the key issue is whether hallucinated ‘objects’ have unique trajectories through time and space that permit their individuation, and there is no indication in Husserl’s texts that he thinks they do. Besides, it is a clear commitment of Husserl that *only* existing objects can be individuals (2023: 506).

The thought again is that only existing objects are individual, but hallucinations do not target existing objects; therefore, hallucinations do not target individuals. The idea that hallucination does not track individuals is rendered in the following way: hallucination carries no singular content.

Assembling the pieces of these various considerations, Overgaard’s argument seems to run as follows:

- (1) intrinsic to perception is to carry singular content (meaning: perception picks out individuals)
- (2) intrinsic to hallucination is not to carry singular content

From these two premises, he then draws the conclusion that

- (3) hallucinations are not perceptions

But now, if proposition (3) stands, then it follows that Husserl’s theory is committed to disjunctivism. For remember: according to the characterization of disjunctivism provided in Sect. 1, disjunctivism consists in the idea that perception and hallucination do not belong to the same psychological kind. This is exactly the conclusion drawn by Overgaard. He writes:

Husserl is committed to the thesis that hallucinatory experiences essentially do not have singular content. Since perceptual experiences essentially do, and since this is a difference in the intrinsic features of the two experiences, it follows that Husserl is committed to disjunctivism (Overgaard, 2023: 508).

In the next section, I provide reasons to resist this conclusion.

3 Against Husserl's Disjunctivism

How to assess Overgaard's interpretation? A first line of attack against this interpretation could question Overgaard's idea, which he leaves unargued for, to take the nature of an attitude's content and not its phenomenal character (*Leibhaftigkeit* or lack thereof) as the element that defines psychological kinds. Why, to put this differently, should one not conclude that perception and hallucination belong to the same psychological kind on the ground that they both share *Leibhaftigkeit*? Despite raising the point, I will not pursue this strategy for two reasons. First, the rubber of this objection hits the road only if one already has a proper understanding of what Husserl means by *Leibhaftigkeit*. However, and as hinted at the start of Sect. 2, this understanding is precisely what we lack: to the best of my knowledge, nowhere does Husserl elaborate on the phenomenological credentials of this notion and it exceeds the purposes of this paper to offer a positive description.⁷ Second, even if Husserl had developed a theory of *Leibhaftigkeit*, this theory per se taken would not resolve the question of whether hallucination and perception belong to the same psychological kind. For this question presupposes settling the more general issue of what constitutes a psychological kind, which is a very controversial matter in itself that I cannot explore in this paper.

Here, I will instead zoom in on the notion of singular content, which Overgaard operates with in his papers but leaves undefined. In this section, I show that there are at least two different ways of understanding that notion. First, this notion can be taken to be tantamount to that of Russell-style content (soon to be further characterized). Husserl's theory of perception would qualify as disjunctivist only contingent on this specific understanding of singular content. But, as I argue below, the problem with this understanding simply is that Husserl's phenomenology (at least, in the *LI*) does not have the logical resources to accommodate that notion. Second, singular content might mean a perceptual content with determinate reference. Now, this—I contend—is the notion of singular content Husserl operates with in the *LI*.⁸ However, on this understanding of singular content, an experience can carry singular content without picking out an individual object in a factive sense. Hence, carrying singular content is not intrinsic, or proprietary, to perception, for hallucinations too carry contents of that kind. The conclusion I will draw from this in Sect. 4 is that Husserl is not committed to disjunctivism, but rather to conjunctivism.

⁷ I have assumed without argument that *Leibhaftigkeit* pertains to the phenomenal character of the experience, but this might not be the only way of construing this notion. Still, I submit that my point might retain significance whatever *Leibhaftigkeit* turns out to be. For *Leibhaftigkeit* is a property that is shared equally by perception and hallucination and we are owed an argument as to why this property is deemed to be irrelevant to the definition of an experiential kind. For an interesting discussion of Husserl's *Leibhaftigkeit* in relation to representationalist theories of perception, see Pacherie 1999.

⁸ Husserl uses the term of 'content [*Inhalt*]' with widely different meanings depending on the context in which this term is employed (Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 527f). However, I focus here only on the notion of content relevant to his philosophy of perception. As it should become clear in the following, by 'perceptual content with determinate reference' I mean what Husserl calls the 'mere representation [*Repräsentation schlechthin*]' of an act, i.e., the whole constituted by a matter and its (illustrative) sensations (Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 621f). I come back to these notions in due course.

Start with the first way of construing singular content. Admittedly, Overgaard does not explicitly characterize this notion in Russellian terms, but it stands to reason that his interpretation requires a Russell-style understanding of content. To see why, I first broach the idea of a Russellian content in broad strokes. I will start from general considerations about the notion of singular content in the philosophy of language, I then show that these considerations are relevant to Husserl's theory of intentionality. In a subsequent step, I suggest that, since perception is an intentional experience, my considerations on the notion of singular content apply to perception as well.

In its simplest form, a Russellian content is an entity constituted by a concrete particular and a property. Russell's famous example is that the content [Mont Blanc is more than 4000 m high] is constituted by Mont Blanc: "I believe that Mont Blanc itself, for all its snowfields, is a constituent of that which is actually asserted in the sentence 'Mont Blanc is more than 4000 metres high'," as Russell writes in a letter to Frege (Frege, 1980: 169). Russell's idea hence is that, whenever a subject has or is in an attitude carrying singular content (thus understood), this subject is acquainted with an individual entity—acquaintance is established because the individual entity is constitutive of the content of this subject's attitude.

For the purpose of this paper, I will sidestep the problem of how one is supposed to understand this view in attitudes other than perception (Nelson, 2023). Equally, I will not discuss how Russell himself employs that notion to develop his own theory of perception (Russell, 1917). My point here merely is the following: Overgaard's disjunctivist reading of Husserl, which relies on the idea of a difference in kind between perceptual and hallucinatory content, requires the notion of perceptual content to be construed along Russellian lines as a content that is partly constituted by an individual object. For it is this understanding of content that licenses the view according to which the psychological kind of hallucination differs from that of perception: perceptions are relational insofar as they carry Russellian content. Hallucinations are not relational because they do not carry Russellian content.

So far so good—except that Husserl does not understand singular content in this way. For Husserl draws a sharp distinction between the meaning and the object of an attitude. This distinction is pivotal for his theory of intentionality and, by extension, for his theory of perception *qua* intentional experience in the *LI*.

Let me introduce this distinction by developing some considerations about the linguistic phenomenon of supposition (Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 331, Eng. trans. 65). Linguistic expressions are used in 'real supposition,' when they stand for their referents. To use one of Husserl's examples: when we normally, say in usual conversation, utter the sentence 'the earth is round,' we refer to the state of affairs being-round of the earth. However, Husserl tells us that, in addition to real (and material⁹) supposition, expressions can also be used in 'logical' or 'formal supposition.' This is when a given expression is not used to refer to its object or to itself, but rather to its meaning. So, for instance, we can use 'the earth is round' to refer to the propositional meaning conveyed by the sentence: this is the (non-Russellian) proposition [the earth is round].

⁹ This is when expressions are used to refer to themselves, as when they are put in quotation marks, e.g. when we write: "'the earth is round' is a sentence."

Supposition hence indicates a distinction between two entities: the meaning of an expression and its object. At the propositional level, this distinction can be explained as follows: propositions are constituted by meanings. For instance, the proposition [the earth is round] is constituted by the concept expressed by the definite description ‘the earth’ and the logical predicate expressed by the propositional function ‘[...] is round.’ By contrast, the earth’s being round is a state of affairs constituted by non-semantic entities: a concrete particular (the earth) and a property (being-round). States of affairs are truth-makers: for, when they subsist, they make propositions true. And, accordingly, propositions are truth-bearers.

The interim conclusion of this discussion is that Husserl’s philosophy of language cannot accommodate Russell-style propositional contents, i.e., propositions that are constituted by concrete individuals. For concrete individuals are parts of states of affairs, not of propositions, and states of affairs are not contents of attitudes.

Up to now I have used the term “attitude” in a lax manner, but it is now time to adopt a more precise terminology given that my point can be generalized to any intentional experience, i.e., to any experience that carries a meaning (in a sense to be soon specified):¹⁰ the veridicality of an intentional experience cannot be explained by recourse to singular contents of this kind. For there are no singular contents of this kind. This interim conclusion can also be applied to perceptual experiences insofar as they are intentional, i.e., sense-carrying experiences: the veridicality of a perceptual experience cannot be explicated in terms of this experience carrying singular content (in this sense). It then follows that Overgaard’s argument to the effect that the difference between perception and hallucination is a difference in nature—where perception carries singular content and hallucination does not—does not get off the ground. It does not because Husserl does not operate with the notion of Russell-style singular content.¹¹

But then, how can the difference between perception and hallucination be explained? I already hinted that singular content could be understood in another sense, and I now aim at showing that a clarification of this second sense of singular content can provide the answer to that question. To shed light on this second sense

¹⁰ As I elaborate below, Husserl defines the notion of an intentional experience and, more precisely, that of an objectifying act as an experience constituted by a belief-quality, a truth-assessable matter, and intuitive contents. While the doxastic quality is important for a full account of perception, this paper mainly focuses on the matter and the intuitive contents in perception. The reason is this: Husserl accepts the possibility that a subject can undergo a hallucination without this experience being accompanied by belief (see also footnote 6) and he also accepts that perceptions, which are not hallucinations, can be deprived of belief-quality (Husserl 2001, Hua 19/1: 511f): if that is possible, then the presence or lack of a belief-quality is at least *prima facie* irrelevant to the question of whether hallucination and perception are experiences of the same kind, which is the question at stake in this article.

¹¹ Does Husserl’s introduction of noemata in *Ideen* turn the table of this discussion (Husserl 1976, Hua 3/1)? The answer depends on how noemata ought to be understood. This is an issue imbued with controversy that I will not address in this paper for the reasons outlined at the end of Sect. 1. But suppose one were tempted to support a disjunctivist interpretation of Husserl by endorsing the view that the noema is constituted by the intended object (or that the noema is that very object in the phenomenological reflection, see Drummond, 1990), as proponents of the so-called East Coast interpretation argue. In that case, I suspect another burden is put on the shoulders of the disjunctivist reading: for Husserl’s transcendental idealism of *Ideen* (and its debated metaphysical assumptions) must be shown to be compatible with the naïve realism that comes attached with disjunctivism (in the variant at stake in this paper).

of ‘singular content,’ it might be helpful to come back to the conceptual distinction between propositions and states of affairs.

Start with the question about the nature of (propositional or nominal) meanings: according to the Husserl of the *LI*, these are semantic properties that are instantiated in experiences. He writes: “Meaning is related to varied acts of meaning something [...] just as redness *in specie* is to the slips of paper which lie here, and which all ‘have’ the same redness” (Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 106, Eng. trans. mod. 230). An individualized meaning, i.e., the part or moment of the experience corresponding to a semantic property, is called a ‘matter.’ Husserl defines the matter as follows: “*The matter [...] must be that element in an act which first gives its reference to an object, and reference so wholly definite that it not merely fixes the object meant in a general way, but also the precise way in which it is meant*” (Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 429, Eng. trans. 121).¹² Two important consequences follow from this idea.

The first is that, since meanings are truth-bearers, matters (qua individualized meanings) are truth-assessable. An attitude is correct (or veridical) if the meaning it instantiates is true. And, as we have seen, a propositional meaning is true if it corresponds to a subsisting state of affairs. The same can be said about nominal meanings: a concept is true if it corresponds to an existing object, otherwise it is false (see Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 654f).¹³

The second consequence is that experiences carrying a matter are intentional (whereas experiences that do not carry a matter are not intentional: sensations, e.g., are not intentional, because they carry no matter). Now, perceptual experiences do carry a matter—Husserl writes in a passage that needs some unpacking: “*Each concretely complete objectifying act has three components: its quality, its matter and its representative content. To the extent that this content functions as a purely signitive or purely intuitive representative [...] the act is a purely signitive [or] a purely intuitive act*” (Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 620f, Eng. trans. 242).

By sidestepping certain complications that are not relevant to my present discussion, the ideas conveyed in this passage can be reformulated as follows:

- (1) every objectifying (or ‘intentional’) act has three constituents: a doxastic quality, a matter, and a representative content (‘sensations’);

¹² As Drummond (1990: 35f) notes, Husserl’s usage of the term ‘matter’ in the *LI* suffers from ambiguity: for this word is employed interchangeably to refer to a semantic property and to the individual constituent of a token-experience instantiating that property. In this paper, I only use ‘matter’ in the second acceptance.

¹³ The difference between straightforward perception (perceiving *o*), which instantiates nominal meanings, and categorial or propositional perception (perceiving *that*), which instantiates propositional meanings, is of central significance to Husserl’s theory of perception. However, I will not address the difference of these two forms of perception in this paper. I have two reasons for that. First, the debate I am contributing here to does not reserve separate treatment for each of these two forms of perception and so neither will I. Second, and more importantly, it makes sense not to reserve separate treatment for each of these two forms of perception: since straightforward perception and categorial perception, arguably, are both cases of perception, it stands to reason that the question of whether perception should be understood in conjunctivist or disjunctivist terms applies to both forms of perception—regardless of their differences.

(2) depending on the role played by sensations in the act, the act is either a signification or an intuition.¹⁴

Pondering these two theses can foster further progress in the understanding of perceptual experiences. Start with the idea that, since Husserl's notion of intuition encompasses imagination and perceptual experiences, one can infer from (1) and (2) that

(3) every perception is intentional because every perception carries a matter.

Accordingly, "every perception is characterized by the intention of grasping its object as present, and in propria persona" (Husserl 2001, Hua 19/1: 365, Eng. trans. 86).¹⁵ Further, we are told that not only intuitive experiences, but also signitive experiences ("significations") carry matters. Significations are acts of thinking that refer to their objects via or through linguistic expressions (Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 43f). But if acts of both kinds carry a matter,¹⁶ then the difference between these two psychological kinds demands an explanation. As the quote suggests, the explanation ultimately has to do with the different functions that sensations fulfil in and for the respective experiences. For my current purposes, it suffices to look at how the different functions fulfilled by sensations in signitive and perceptual experiences impact the intentional character of these acts without unearthing what exactly these functions are.

In particular, significations are said to refer in an indeterminate way or "without determinate differentiation [*ohne bestimmte Differenzierung*]" (Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 554, Eng. trans. mod. 198). By contrast, perceptual experiences refer in a determinate way: "intuition gives [...] determinateness of objective direction [*Bestimmtheit der gegenständlichen Richtung*]" (Husserl 2001, Hua 19, 553, Eng. trans. mod. 197). To illustrate the idea, consider the difference between (linguistically) thinking of a mug on the desk and perceiving the mug on the desk. In the first case, thinking of the mug leaves all properties of the mug—its color, shape, weight, aesthetic properties, etc.—undetermined. By contrast, if you have a visual experience of the mug, then all these properties are determined—it is not possible to have a perceptual experience without all these properties to be fixed in (but also only in) the profile or adumbration

¹⁴ This is a simplification of Husserl's theory. For imaginations, too, are intuitive acts and, while these acts carry intuitive contents, these contents are not sensations in the "ordinary" or "narrow" understanding of the term (Husserl 2001, Hua 19/2: 235). On this understanding, sensations only are presentative contents. But not all intuitive contents are presentative contents: sensory phantasms are analogizing (or picturing), they are not presentative. Despite this simplification, it still remains the case that not the contents per se, but rather their role in an act, as specified by the notion of an "interpretative form," determines whether the act is signitive or intuitive (Husserl 2001, Hua 19/2: 245).

¹⁵ One can read a few years later and in more succinct form: intentionality is "the essential determination of perception" (Hua 16: 14, Eng. trans. 11).

¹⁶ The relation between the matter of signification and that of intuition is debated. Some interpreters have argued that the two are type-identical: for each intuitive matter there is, at least in principle, a qualitatively identical signitive matter; see Kidd, 2019 and Salice 2012. For an opposite view, see Mulligan, 1995, Hopp, 2011, among others.

in which the object is given to you. It is in this sense, I submit, that perceptual experiences have singular content: they have ‘complete determinateness of reference.’¹⁷

It can be said that, by referring in a determinate way, i.e., by carrying singular content (in the sense currently at stake), perceptual experiences pick out individuals. However, ‘picking out’ should not be understood in a factive sense any longer. We should not understand ‘picking out’ in a factive sense for two interrelated reasons. The first is that the determinateness of reference solely derives from the role that sensations play in the experience, as indicated in the previous quote. The second is that, remember, the object is not a constituent of the singular content (thus understood). As Husserl writes: “*objects, that are nothing in a presentation, are also unable to bring about differences among presentations*” (Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 450, Eng. trans. mod. 132). Because the object is external to, or transcend, the experience, its presence or absence does not alter the structure of the experience itself. But this brings me back to the question I have left open at the end of my critical assessment of Overgaard’s proposal: we know that there is a difference between perception and hallucination, so what explains this difference if this cannot be traced back to a difference in the kind of content borne by the two experiences?

Remember that the matter of perceptual experiences is truth-assessable: an experience is veridical if it instantiates a meaning that is true. It then follows that only if a perceptual experience instantiates a true meaning, the experience *picks out* individuals (now in a factive sense). Hence, a veridical perceptual experience of *o* does put the perceiver in a relation with *o*, but this relation is not grounded in the very nature of the experience (as the disjunctivist would like to have it): for a falsidical perceptual experience of *o* carries exactly the same content of its veridical counterpart, but exists without entering a relation to *o*.¹⁸

This conclusion also offers an explanation of the two features of hallucination discussed above in Sect. 2, which is an alternative to the one developed by Overgaard. Hallucination, Overgaard rightly states, does not pick out anything and, hence, the selfsame object cannot be targeted in different hallucinations. Why is that? This is not because, as Overgaard claims, hallucination lacks Russell-style singular content. It rather is because the matter of hallucination is false: I hallucinate the black cobra on my desk because the meaning expressed by the definite description ‘the black cobra on my desk’ is empty. And precisely because there is no such thing as the referent of ‘the black cobra on my desk,’ one cannot have multiple hallucinations targeting the same cobra.

Now, the view I have just attributed to Husserl faces a difficult challenge, as Overgaard recognizes. His example might illustrate the problem. Suppose that:

I see a person with my mother’s characteristic features walking towards me.
 “Here is my mother,” I think. “What a nice surprise.” But unbeknownst to me,
 my mother has a Doppelgänger, and it is the Doppelgänger who is approaching

¹⁷ Singular content in this acceptation hence is a “representation” in Husserl’s technical sense: the matter combined with sensations fulfilling a specific (an illustrative) function (Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 621f).

¹⁸ “[...] [P]erception essentially is a presumptively apprehension, not an adequately intuition, of the object” (Husserl 2001, Hua 19/1: 375, Eng. trans. mod. 93).

me. Clearly, it is the Doppelgänger I see, and whom my experience picks out, regardless of what I think about the matter. Here I am precisely wrong about which individual I am experiencing. To suppose I must be experiencing my mother is to suppose I must be hallucinating an absent individual, instead of seeing the individual before me. It is to make a misperception out of what is clearly a case of misidentification—as if prior experience with an individual would effectively render us blind to other individuals with the same features (Overgaard, 2023: 510).

This example, which aligns with a similar one discussed by Hopp (2020: 32), is the analogue of Husserl's notorious case of the perceptual encounter with a wax puppet which is taken to be a lady (Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 451). How can this problem be dealt with within the reconstruction I have sketched in this section? I offer two comments.

The first is that Husserl is indeed forced to admit that the perceiver is *not* perceiving the Doppelgänger, but is rather committing a perceptual error when living through a perceptual experience directed at the mother. This is exactly the position he defends in the 5th *LI*, when he writes that, before the perceptual trick is unveiled, “we see [*sehen*] a lady, and not a waxwork figure” (Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 459, Eng. trans. 138; *mutatis mutandis*: ‘I see my mother, I don't see a Doppelgänger’). Whether the perceptual error necessarily qualifies as a hallucination is a matter that I will not discuss here,¹⁹ for my attention goes to a rather different point.

Husserl appears committed to the view that the sense of ‘perception’ at stake in a first-personal report is orthogonal to the sense of ‘perception’ at stake in the third-personal attribution of an attitude. The two senses are different because only the first, but not the second, expresses a phenomenally conscious experience. This is exactly why the subject, in the scenario at stake, sees “a lady [or their mother], and not a waxwork figure [or the Doppelgänger].” Now, how the two senses of ‘perception’ hang together certainly is an important problem for the philosophy of perception, but it seems to me that this is a problem, which does not concern phenomenology (or, at least, Husserl's understanding of phenomenology). To put this differently, the theory of intentionality presented in the *LI* compels Husserl to dismiss any third-personal attribution of an experience as irrelevant to his variant of phenomenology.

Suppose one considers this reply to be unsatisfactory on systematic grounds. In that case, and this is my second comment, at least two dialectical positions open up, but only one of them appears hospitable. The first one is to adopt a critical stance towards Husserl's theory of perception as I sketched it in this section: after all, “Hus-

¹⁹ Suffice to say that, in my opinion, Husserl is not forced to concede that the perceptual error at stake is a hallucination, as contended by Overgaard (and Hopp, 2020: 32). Remember that the matter (the truth-assessable content of an intentional attitude) is defined as the element in an act which gives “*reference so wholly definite that it not merely fixes the object meant in a general way, but also the precise way in which it is meant.*” It follows that there are two ways a perception can misfire. Either there simply is no object that is fixed by the matter (this would delimit the notion of hallucination). Or the matter fixes an object, but the object is meant in a way it is not—this appears to capture the kind of perceptual error portrayed by Overgaard: I mistakenly take this individual in front of me (which exists) to be my mother, but she is her Doppelgänger.

serl was hardly infallible; he may have held implausible views,” as Overgaard in another passage of his paper notes (2023: 501). Nothing could be truer! Of course, the tenability of that critical stance will hinge on the systematic reasons appealed to by the critic in the first place. But this suggests that further progress on the matter will be achieved by redirecting the focus of the debate from a reconstruction of Husserl’s theory (as it has been conducted here) to an assessment of the systematic reasons speaking in favor or against that theory. I find nothing objectionable in this line of reasoning.

The other dialectical position is to appeal to the principle of charity to insulate Husserl’s theory from the consequences the critic considers to be unwelcome. While, of course, the principle of charity is an invaluable instrument in matters of historical interpretation, I believe the application of this principle to this particular instance is not licensed: for the allegedly unpalatable consequences directly derive from general and fundamental principles of Husserl’s theory of intentionality, as I think this section has illustrated. Hence, the risk is that revising those general principles would not lead to a superior interpretation of Husserl, but to a travesty of his theory.

4 Husserl’s Conjunctivism

Remember the main results of Overgaard’s comparison between perception, hallucination, and imagination. Hallucination is similar to perception insofar as they both are accompanied by *Leibhaftigkeit*. However, hallucination is dissimilar to perception (and similar to imagination) because it does not carry Russell-style singular content. Only perception bears singular content of that kind. Now, if the reconstruction in the previous section is correct, this picture should be replaced along the following lines: perceptual experiences are either veridical or falsidical. Both veridical and falsidical perceptual experiences are accompanied by *Leibhaftigkeit* and both of them carry singular content in the sense that they have determinate reference. The difference between the two, however, is that perceptual experiences belonging to the first class bear content that is true, whereas experiences belonging to second class bear content that is false. Hence, only the first experiences are successful in picking out individuals, whereas the second do not do so. Because of this reason, it is possible for the selfsame object to be targeted by different perceptions, whereas it is not possible for this to happen in hallucination.

This seems to be precisely the view proposed by Husserl, when he writes: “we distinguish between *correct* and *false* perception. Sensual illusion [*Sinnestäuschung*], hallucination, illusion [*Illusion*]: *they are genuine perceptions* from a purely descriptive point of view” (Husserl, 2004, Hua 38: 10, *my italics*).²⁰ Interestingly, Overgaard notes that this and similar quotes that emphasize the ‘purely descriptive point of view’ in pondering the matter do not have substantive counterweight against his argument because the disjunctivist, too, is happy to admit that hallucinations and

²⁰ Similar views are expressed in Husserl [2001], Hua 19: 358, among other places.

perceptions are indiscernible from a descriptive point of view.²¹ Overgaard's reading of Husserl appears plausible but it is premised on a specific understanding of the attribute 'descriptive.' According to this understanding, 'descriptive' is equivalent to 'introspective' along the following lines: to introspection, hallucination and perception are indiscernible. However, I propose that we do not have to read 'descriptive' in that way and that there is at least a second sense of 'descriptive,' which should be brought to bear on this discussion.

According to this second sense, 'descriptive' does not mean 'introspective,' but it rather means 'essential' or 'eidetic': a descriptive difference is an essential or eidetic difference (and, consequently, descriptive identity means essential identity). To illustrate this use of the term 'descriptive' as applied to perception, consider this passage:

the inkpot confronts us in perception. Based on our repeated contention concerning the descriptive essence [*deskriptives Wesen*] of perception, this means no more phenomenologically than that we undergo a certain sequence of experiences of the class of sensations, sensuously unified in a peculiar serial pattern, and informed by a certain act-character of 'interpretation', which endows it with an objective sense (Husserl 2001, Hua 19: 559, Eng. trans. mod. 201).

Here, the description of perceptual experience in terms of interpretation of sensations is supposed to reveal the essence or nature of that experience. On this understanding of 'descriptive,' the previously quoted passage "[hallucination, illusion] *are genuine perceptions* from a purely descriptive point of view" just means that, from an eidetic or essential point of view, perceptions, hallucinations, and illusions share the same nature: they are perceptual experiences.²² If this reading is correct, it immediately generates a robust commitment to conjunctivism.

5 Conclusion

Is Husserl's theory of perception a form of disjunctivism or of conjunctivism? Possibly, the question has no univocal answer to begin with. For Husserl might have not endorsed one—that is, one single—theory of perception consistently throughout his philosophical development. However, I maintain that any reconstruction of his theory—or theories—should start where his reflection about these matters started and, arguably, the view on perception sketched in the *Logical Investigations* is the first milestone in this development. If my reading of this work is correct, then Husserl began his journey in the philosophy of perception as a conjunctivist.

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²¹ Overgaard's point is premised on the idea that the introspectively accessible properties of an experience, like *Leibhaftigkeit*, are not revelatory of this experience's nature or essence. This is a problematic premise I have questioned at the start of Sect. 3, but not further explored.

²² Cimino, 2021 concurs in reading the term 'descriptive' in these passages as 'eidetic'.

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