

Amodal Completion and Presentational Conservatism

Published in *Analysis* (2024)

<https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anae021>

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1. Introduction

Elijah Chudnoff's (2021) *Forming Impressions: Expertise in Perception and Intuition* is about how experts differ phenomenologically and epistemically from novices. It defends Presentational Conservatism, the view that experiences are capable of providing direct prima facie justification in virtue of their presentational phenomenology, which involves a felt sense of awareness. Chudnoff advances and defends the novel thesis that both perceptual experiences and intuitions have presentational phenomenology, in virtue of which they can justify corresponding beliefs. Moreover, applying recent work on the psychology of perceptual learning and flexibility, Chudnoff argues that experts in a domain differ both perceptually and cognitively from novices in ways that are reflected in their perceptual and intellectual presentational phenomenology. Expert impressions therefore differ epistemically from those of novices. In particular, they provide differing justification for corresponding beliefs that have expert-level contents.

Chudnoff's account of impressions and their epistemology relies on the nature of presentational phenomenology. My aim is to raise a challenge for Chudnoff's characterization of presentational phenomenology and its epistemic power. This in turn challenges the thesis of Presentational Conservatism.

Section 2 presents Chudnoff's thesis of Presentational Conservatism and how it differs from Phenomenal Conservatism. Section 3 describes Chudnoff's account of felt awareness in cases of perceptual amodal completion, which is used to motivate Presentational Conservatism as distinct from Phenomenal Conservatism. Section 4 considers why whole objects rather than perceptible parts alone affect phenomenology, and suggests a plausible answer, which suggests a further constraint on awareness. Section 5 raises a challenge, but suggests a revision to address it. Sections 6 and 7 argue that Chudnoff's ingenious application of presentational phenomenology to the epistemic problem of other minds is not compatible with the revised constraint suggested in section 5. Section 8 considers responding with a more liberal condition on felt awareness, but suggests it deflates the epistemic force of presentational phenomenology. Section 9 considers three ways to reply that are compatible with Presentational Conservatism, each of which has downsides. Section 10 raises a promising alternative that nonetheless gives up Presentational Conservatism.

2. Presentational Conservatism

First, Chudnoff's thesis of Presentational Conservatism relies on the notion of presentational phenomenology. This is important because Chudnoff argues that both perceptual experiences and intellectual intuitions are ways of forming impressions, and what such perceptual experiences and cognitive episodes have in common that makes them impressions is their presentational phenomenology. And their presentational phenomenology is what accounts for their epistemic role.

An episode has presentational phenomenology just in case it involves a felt sense of awareness of its objects, or the bits of reality that make its contents true. A felt sense of awareness requires that a represented object:

- (a) contributes or makes a difference to phenomenology;
- (b) is differentiated from a background of other things; and
- (c) is a potential target for demonstrative thoughts.

“If *e* makes you aware of *x*, it phenomenally differentiates *x* from a background and enables demonstrative thoughts about *x*” (Chudnoff 2021: 107). For example, if a visual experience makes you aware of a coffee mug, then it phenomenally differentiates the mug from its background and enables you to have demonstrative thoughts about it, such as, “*That* is my mug.”

Notably, according to Chudnoff, representing *p* perceptually or cognitively does not entail having presentational phenomenology with respect to *p*. One may represent *p* or some constituent of *p* without having felt awareness or presentational phenomenology with respect to it. An experience may come to represent an object or situation without meeting the conditions for a felt sense of awareness that corresponding presentational phenomenology requires. Representation thus places an upper bound on presentation.

According to Chudnoff, impressions play an important epistemic role. In virtue of their presentational phenomenology, both perceptual experiences and cognitive intuitions can *prima facie* justify beliefs with corresponding contents.

Presentational Conservatism: Iff you have experience with presentational phenomenology with respect to *p*, then do you have some *prima facie* justification for believing *p*. (Chudnoff 2021: 103)

Chudnoff’s Presentational Conservatism differs from a more familiar view about the epistemic role of experience.

Phenomenal Conservatism: If you have an experience as of it being the case that *p*, then you thereby have some *prima facie* justification for believing that *p*. (Chudnoff 2021: 102)

According to Phenomenal Conservatism, representing *p* can suffice for *prima facie* justification to believe *p* (see, e.g., Huemer 2001). However, according to Chudnoff, there is an important epistemic difference between felt awareness and mere representation. Presentational phenomenology, but not representation alone, grounds *prima facie* justificatory force. This is meant to capture the idea that felt awareness of an object matters epistemically in a distinctive way that just representing by means of an experience does not. Representing *p* does not suffice for the special kind of justificatory force stemming from presentational phenomenology with respect to *p*.

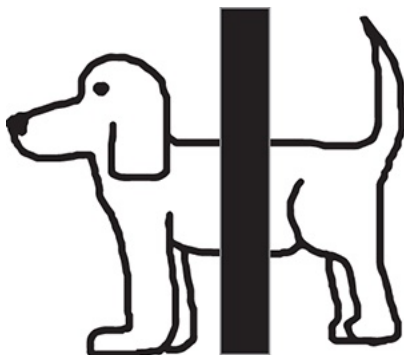
This difference has consequences when it comes to the epistemic standing of expert and novice perceivers in a domain. Based on an astute review of substantial empirical evidence about perceptual learning, Chudnoff argues that expertise in a domain can change what an experience represents (see also Connolly 2019, Stokes 2021). So, a skilled radiologist who can spot tumors

in x-rays may visually represent abnormalities. The expert's perceptual experience represents expert-level contents.

According to Phenomenal Conservatism, this representational difference suffices for an epistemic difference. However, according to Presentational Conservatism, it does not. Nonetheless, Chudnoff argues that perceptual expertise also sometimes alters presentational phenomenology with respect to expert-level perceptual contents. So, when viewing radiographs, the radiologist can form expert-level impressions that have presentational phenomenology with respect to things like tumors or abnormalities. Thus, an expert who is better at forming impressions in a domain can differ epistemically from a novice, by the lights of Presentational Conservatism. In virtue of its presentational phenomenology, the expert's visual experience can confer immediate *prima facie* justification to believe the x-ray is not normal.

A lot turns on the difference between the representational contents and the presentational phenomenology of an experience. In particular, presentational phenomenology has a distinctive epistemic significance that mere representation as such lacks. This is a key part of Chudnoff's account of the perceptual and epistemic advantages that skilled individuals enjoy when they form expert-level impressions in a domain.

3. *Perceptual Modesty*



[Figure 1: A case of visual amodal completion (Chudnoff 2021: 104).]

To assess this bundle of views, it is useful to focus on Chudnoff's treatment of so-called "amodal completion" cases in perception. In a typical amodal completion case, you see an object (a dog, a blob) to continue behind something that partly hides it (a picket fence, a black stripe) (Figure 1; see also Chudnoff 2021: 110). Or you might see an object, such as a coffee mug, to be the sort of thing that has a side pointed away from you and hidden by its facing surface. In amodal completion, the occluder does not appear to shield distinct objects, but instead partly blocks a single apparent object from view.

Chudnoff says you enjoy presentational phenomenology for the parts of the dog that you see and that are not hidden from view. But in Chudnoff's account you also have presentational phenomenology with respect to the whole dog (which includes its hidden bits). Or, you see the whole mug in addition to the facing surface of the mug. Not only do you represent the dog and the mug, but you also have a felt sense of visual awareness, of the sort that characterizes presentational phenomenology, with respect to both the facing surface and the whole mug. In

neither case is there visual presentational phenomenology with respect to the hidden bit of dog or the back of the mug.

According to Presentational Conservatism (like Phenomenal Conservatism), it follows from this that your presentational phenomenology grounds direct prima facie justification to believe that there is not just a tail or a handle but also a full dog or a complete mug in front of you.

It is an important insight for philosophy of perception that perceiving an object does not require perceiving all its parts or attributes. Typically, one does not perceive each of the parts and features of the things one perceives. This suggests a general thesis that I'll call *Perceptual Modesty*.

Perceptual Modesty: Perceiving an object does not require perceiving all its parts or attributes.¹

Denying Perceptual Modesty risks yielding something like a sense-datum theory about the objects of perception.

4. *Visibility*

What is the relationship between Perceptual Modesty and Chudnoff's Presentational Conservatism in cases of amodal completion?

Consider the following puzzle. Why say you have visual presentational phenomenology with respect to the whole dog rather than just the spatially distributed mereological fusion of unhidden dog parts? Or with respect to the 3D mug rather than just the mug shell comprising only the outer surface of the mug that faces you? This is a puzzle because, from where you currently stand, you could not tell the difference visually between the members of each pair. Thus, James Gullledge (2022) calls them "public ringers."

Perceptual Modesty allows that you perceive the whole dog or entire mug (or their full shapes). According to Presentational Conservatism, distinctive epistemic justification to believe a whole dog is in front of you must stem from presentational phenomenal character of a whole dog experience and not a mere fusion experience. For Chudnoff, it is not enough to say that vision represents the dog or the 3D mug, since representation is only an upper bound on presentation. What matters epistemically is that the whole dog or 3D mug, not just the fusion or the facing surface, satisfies requirements (a) through (c) on felt awareness, described earlier in section 2.

Intuitively, the whole dog and 3D mug do enable demonstrative thought, which satisfies (c). Given patterns of occlusion, they also may enable figure-ground segregation, thereby satisfying (b). Plausibly, they even affect visual phenomenology in a way that the fusion or the surface does not, which would fulfill (a). But how? In particular, how does the whole dog (or dog shape) affect visual perceptual phenomenology in a way that the fusion of unhidden dog parts does not?

One way to unpack this is that the whole dog or 3D mug anchors or explains certain perceptual expectations. When one moves the occluder or the dog, one expects to see bits of dog that were hidden. When one turns the mug, one expects to see the back of it, not a hollow shell.

¹ I am inclined to accept the stronger claim that there is nothing in existence awareness of which requires awareness of all its parts or attributes. This is a far more general Modesty principle about awareness.

When one looks at the dog now, one's experience manifests what Noë (2004) describes as one's mastery of relevant patterns of sensorimotor contingency. The hidden parts make a difference to current phenomenology by being potential objects of felt awareness.

Perceptual expectations therefore serve as evidence that the whole dog and 3D mug rather than just the fusion and the shell are objects of felt awareness. The whole dog and 3D mug affect phenomenology now by setting up expectations for perceptual presentation under various other scenarios.

This suggests a further condition which says more about which objects can be presented, which I'll call *Visibility*.

Visibility: Objects of felt visual awareness comprise only parts and attributes that in principle are potential objects of felt visual awareness. No visible object has parts or attributes that are not potentially visible.

This adds a constraint to Perceptual Modesty. Whatever is visually presented has no necessarily hidden parts.

5. *Perceptibility*

The *Visibility* condition maintains that for an object to be presented visually it must affect visual phenomenology, where that is understood to imply that each of its parts or aspects must potentially be the target of visual presentational phenomenology.

There is a challenge to *Visibility* as stated. Consider a case of multisensory perception, such as both seeing and hearing my hands clapping, or both seeing and feeling the coffee mug. Arguably, one can visually represent something that has parts or features that are not even in principle visible. So, one might see the clapping event to be the kind of thing that makes or includes a sound, even when one is not hearing that sound. And one might see the mug to be the sort of thing that would resist the force of touch, or that has a temperature, even if one is not currently touching it. Each is a case of crossmodal (amodal) completion. Positing such representation may help to explain perceptual phenomena such as cross-modal illusions and conflict resolution, including ventriloquism and the McGurk effect (see O'Callaghan 2019).²

If that is right, then it is possible that one might have visual presentational phenomenology with respect to things that set up perceptual expectations that are not simply or purely visual. Instead, visual experience sets up expectations for auditory or tactual experiences with presentational phenomenology. If so, visual experience could provide immediate *prima facie* justification to believe that something is a collision or a clapping, or that something is a solid physical object.

In this way, visual presentational phenomenology and felt awareness can reach beyond "purely" visual objects (pure *visibilia*, such as rainbows, shadows, holograms, clouds, or flashes) to the kinds of physical entities we seem to encounter during typical multisensory perceptual consciousness.

Nevertheless, the multisensory case is simple enough to accommodate. Just replace *Visibility* with a more liberal condition on felt visual awareness, which I'll call *Perceptibility*.

² The McGurk effect is a widely studied phenomenon in which visual information about a speaker's mouth movements alters how a spoken utterance sounds.

Perceptibility: Objects of felt visual awareness comprise only parts and attributes that in principle are potential objects of felt perceptual awareness. No visible object has parts or attributes that are not potentially perceptible.

6. Other minds

Another kind of case presents a more serious challenge.

Chudnoff applies his treatment of amodal completion to the epistemic problem of other minds (section 4.3). The epistemic problem of other minds concerns not how we represent mental states of others, but how we are justified in believing others have mental states. Chudnoff suggests a very plausible way to understand how one can be justified on the basis of perception to believe others have mental states, which is a consequence of Presentational Conservatism.

First, mental phenomena, such as emotions, are interior and not themselves publicly observable using the senses. However, certain bodily configurations and movements are observable using the senses. One can be presented visually with the shape of my mouth and eyes and thus have corresponding *prima facie* justification for beliefs about their configuration. But how is one justified in believing I am happy by seeing the shape of my mouth?

Perhaps perception could come to represent mental states like emotions by seeing or hearing physical bodies and faces. But, in Chudnoff's picture—favoring Presentational Conservatism rather than Phenomenal Conservatism—that alone does not establish that perception immediately justifies beliefs about mental states.

Chudnoff's solution is ingenious. My smile is part of an episode that involves both the configuration of my physical body and also my interior emotional state. This episode is the bodily manifestation or expression of my emotion. An expression of happiness is a psychophysical phenomenon that includes happiness (mental) as well as an upturned mouth (bodily) among its features.

Given Perceptual Modesty, one can have felt awareness of the shape of a mouth and also of the manifestation or expression of emotion, while failing to have presentational phenomenology with respect to the happiness itself.

Accordingly, Presentational Conservatism entails that a perceiver can have immediate *prima facie* justification to believe there is an upturned mouth, and also an expression of happiness, but not that I am happy, which is analogous to the hidden bit of dog or the back of the mug. Still, since understanding that expressions of emotion *a priori* entail emotions, one has mediate justification to believe that I am happy by seeing my expression or manifestation of happiness, when combined with one's background understanding of what it is to express emotion. That addresses the epistemic problem of other minds.

7. Disanalogy

But there is a disanalogy between the earlier unimodal and crossmodal amodal completion cases and the case of other minds. In the completion cases, what is hidden is something that could be presented perceptually. One could come to see the hidden bit of dog, and one could feel the solidity of the visible mug. So each is a potential contributor to current felt awareness. And that helps to differentiate what an experience represents from its presentational phenomenology. As far as one can tell, according to Chudnoff, representation does not require even the prospect of presentational phenomenology.

But consider the Perceptibility condition. Mental states of other people are not things that could come into view perceptually. If they are subjective, inner states, they are not the sorts of

things that could be revealed by any of the senses. There is no felt perceptual awareness of the mental states of other people.

Therefore, the emotional component of my expression of happiness is not something that can affect one's phenomenology in the way that the rear of the mug or the temperature of the mug could. My happiness is not something that could be differentiated from its surroundings or enable simple demonstrative thoughts for another perceiver. So, not only is the emotion unperceived, but it could not itself affect a perceiver's present phenomenology by way of setting up expectations for what one would experience under various scenarios. Manifestations or expressions of emotion therefore fail Perceptibility. By Chudnoff's lights, mental states are imperceptible, so manifestations, in contrast with bodily configurations, are not objects of felt visual awareness.

What is the reason to think one's current visual experience includes presentational phenomenology with respect to the expression or manifestation of my emotion (smiling), rather than just the bodily configuration (the shape of my mouth)? It seems that the latter on its own accounts causally for the phenomenal character of one's present visual experience, and exhausts one's capacity for at least figure-ground differentiation.

8. *Awareness*

A potential reply is that cognition or imagination supplies materials to explain why manifestations or expressions of emotion affect one's phenomenology in the right way. For instance, one's knowledge of how bodies and movements reflect inner mental states—with which one is first-personally acquainted—might explain a phenomenological difference between felt visual awareness of happiness manifestations and felt visual awareness of mouth and eye configurations. The potential for introspective awareness (or imagination) of one's own emotion-experiences might make the difference by setting expectations for felt awareness.

However, this does not help solve the epistemic problem of other minds. Expectations about what one would experience in certain emotional states do not seem suited, in the first instance, to provide one with special, immediate prima facie perceptual justification to believe another person is manifesting or expressing emotions.

Setting aside that limitation, according to this type of reply, whatever determines the felt objects of perceptual awareness can reach outside perception (say, to cognition or emotion). If so, extra-perceptual resources and expectations shape perception's presentational phenomenology. This suggests a much weaker condition on which objects can be presented perceptually, which I'll call *Awareness*.

Awareness: Objects of felt visual awareness comprise only parts and attributes that in principle are potential objects of felt perceptual, cognitive, or emotional awareness. No visible object has parts or attributes of which a subject is not potentially perceptually, cognitively, or emotionally aware.

Short of something like this move, I am not sure how to extend Chudnoff's account of amodal completion cases to the mental states of other people.

9. *Some Options*

If that is right, then unless Chudnoff has a better way out, I envision several options.

(i) One option is to retain Perceptual Modesty, the Perceptibility condition, and Presentational Conservatism but to drop their application to manifestations or expressions of mental states such as emotions. This abandons Chudnoff's proposed treatment of the epistemic problem of other minds under Presentational Conservatism. It is defensible that the experience of whole objects and not just their seemingly presented parts can have perceptual presentational phenomenology. And it is defensible that such presentational phenomenology could retain some of the distinctive epistemic advantage described by Presentational Conservatism. But it is not clear how expressions of emotions could affect perceptual phenomenology in a way that bodily shapes and movements do not. This option retains the epistemic advantages of presentation but denies that mental states affect perceptual phenomenology in the right way. Thus, it conflicts with Chudnoff's claim that, "There is no reason to worry that Presentational Conservatism has epistemological consequences that leave us facing the traditional problem of other minds all over again" (Chudnoff 2021: 124).

(ii) A second option is to retain the Perceptibility condition and Presentational Conservatism but to reject Perceptual Modesty. This doubles down on the distinctive epistemic advantage that presentational phenomenology confers. But it requires dropping Chudnoff's proposed treatment of amodal completion cases like the dog figure. Instead, only proper parts of an object that are seemingly presented ground immediate prima facie justification. Again, this does not help with knowing other minds. This option shares certain features with the epistemology of traditional sense-data theories.

(iii) A third option is to retain Perceptual Modesty and Presentational Conservatism but to reject Perceptibility in favor of a more general Awareness condition (as described in section 8). This allows that felt awareness in perception depends on extra-perceptual resources to fix which sorts of objects can enjoy perceptual presentational phenomenology. This strikes me as a fairly radical move in the context of *Forming Impressions*. For instance, it becomes hard to envision a limit on the kinds or types of things—comprising which features and parts—with respect to which a perceiver can have felt visual awareness and presentational phenomenology, even while being always unable to tell them apart from public ringers.

Most importantly, how does such felt awareness confer a distinctive sort of immediate prima facie justification with respect to such objects? For example, why say what is seemingly presented in one's visual experience gives immediate prima facie justification to believe I am a human being rather than a squishy but hollow robot? This is especially pressing, since Presentational Conservatism maintains an important phenomenological and epistemic distinction between presentational phenomenology and representation. Presentational Conservatism is advanced as meaningfully different from Phenomenal Conservatism, the view that we have prima facie justification to believe whatever a perceptual experience represents. The worry is that option (iii) weakens the intuitive force of Presentational Conservatism or folds it in to Phenomenal Conservatism.

10. Conclusion

For my own part, I am inclined to choose a fourth option.

(iv) This option retains Perceptual Modesty. However, it may be that there is nothing in existence awareness of which requires actual or potential awareness of all its parts and attributes. Awareness of an object may require only awareness of some of its parts or attributes. This option rejects any in principle condition such as Visibility, Perceptibility, or Awareness concerning hidden parts, in favor of a minimal requirement for some perceptible parts or attributes.

However, in this case, one ought to be reluctant to place much epistemic weight on presentational phenomenology concerning objects of felt awareness, as compared with, say, what an experience represents. That is because, given public ringers, felt awareness by itself does not bear the epistemic weight of providing a distinctive variety of immediate prima facie justification to believe propositions concerning its apparent objects, where the latter comprise a vast array of things, some of whose parts and features one is (or can become) aware of, and some of which one is not (and cannot become) aware of.

Option (iv) takes a more liberal stance about the objects of felt perceptual awareness, in line with Perceptual Modesty. However, the epistemic role of perceptual presentational phenomenology, at least that to which a subject has access, is less distinctive. Accordingly, this option gives up the epistemically powerful claim that a subject's presentational phenomenology anchors a special variety of justification for their corresponding beliefs. Thus, it gives up Presentational Conservatism.³

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³ I am grateful to Luca Barlassina, Eli Chudnoff, and audience members at the 2023 Pacific Division APA Meeting for valuable comments and constructive discussion.