



# The Phenomenal Character of Perceptual Noise: Epistemic Misfire, Sensory Misfire, or Perceptual Disjoint?

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

What is the experience of noise like? It seems there is something noise is like, at least if the ways in which theorists refer to the experience of noise are anything to go by. For instance, noise as a descriptor crops up in fascinating ways in philosophy and the human sciences. Some authors, understandably, draw attention to noise as an acoustic phenomenon, and yet seem to mean by ‘noise’ something other than an encounter with an unidentified (or identifying) sound. Thus, Casati and Dokic refer to someone’s loud voice as noisy (*‘bruyant,’* 1994, 69); Idhe (2007, 80) points to the noise of cityscapes and of ‘the surrounding lifeworld,’ and also to the ‘invasion’ of the ‘jackhammer in the morning’ as noise, which may be something like the noise Schopenhauer singles out as that ‘most impertinent (...) interruption’ (2005). Noise also surfaces in philosophical

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description of other experiences. Hellie describes the ‘flickering’ and ‘crepitation’ that can occur in colour vision as noise (2005, 493), while Gert claims the ‘salient graininess’ of one’s visual field as a whole is noise (2021). Both Casati and Cavanagh (2019) and Sorensen (2008) discuss shadows as forms of visual noise. Kahneman et al. (2021) discuss cognitive errors as forms of noise, and Sands and Ratey (1986) claim that noise can be, *qua* ‘cognitive overload,’ a feature of the human mind itself.

Insofar as all these descriptions are claims about human experience, from a phenomenological perspective, their range incites curiosity. They seem premised on the idea that there is something like the experience of noise, if we take it on good faith that the above thinkers are not merely bandying about some empty term.<sup>1</sup> Under such a premise, what ought a phenomenological approach—roughly construed as description of (necessary) features of lived experiences and intentional relations involved—offer, in order to clarify how there may be some or other experience(s) underlying these descriptive attributions of noise? Under what terms or via which conceptions can a phenomenological perspective tackle the experience of noise? If there appears to be a dearth of extant phenomenological theories explicitly targeting noise—and especially, targeting noise as something more or other than (unidentified) sound—the implications thereof remain unclear.

The goal here is to address these questions in support of the basic idea that the above descriptions are indeed about something—noise—and more specifically, that there is something distinct about how noise is experienced. In that aim, I will first postulate and motivate some desiderata for a phenomenological account of noise. Broadly speaking, these have to do with the identification of what remains constant within and what varies across diverse experiences of noise, but each of those premises needs careful justifying; that is, that there could be something constant or in common between experiences of noise, and that there are recognisably key manners in which experiences of noise vary. The second part of the paper examines some candidate views for clarifying and explaining the experience of perceptual noise in accordance with those desiderata. After a critical consideration of two such candidates (the epistemic misfire and the sensory misfire views), I draw some lessons that point in another direction

<sup>1</sup>The view that such descriptions are just ‘metaphors’ seems like a non-starter, because it merely displaces the problem. Namely, it leaves open what it is in either the signifier or the signified of the metaphor that embodies some or other ‘noise-like’ property.

for understanding what perceptual noise is like. Namely, I suggest that a phenomenological account of perceptual noise can be scaffolded from the idea of perceptual disjoint, that is, the undergoing of a lack of perceptual ‘unity’ or coherence. On the premise that there is something like a unity of perceptual experience in particular, I lay out the idea that there may then be many forms of ‘disunities’ of such experience. From an analysis of the latter, I suggest, one may account for many different types of experiences of noise, though with a common ‘phenomenal’ thread running through them. I point to some important premises behind that hypothesis and sketch some further questions to be addressed.

## 2 DESIDERATA FOR UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES OF NOISE

How should a phenomenological description of noise be built? The terrain here is pretty open; if one can find across various theories of perception and cognition—phenomenological or otherwise—numerous references or appeals to noise (of which only a smattering are instantiated above), explicitly experiential theories of noise seem otherwise scarce on the ground (the fact that there are certain *anti*-theories of noise notwithstanding).<sup>2</sup> Hence, some desiderata for a phenomenological account of the experience of noise will have to be generated. Two will be set out here, as argued from some basic premises about experiences of noise. A first one concerns the delineation of the domains of experience of noise, and can be set out rather straightforwardly. The second concerns accounting for the specific phenomenal character of noise and will require more spadework.

A first desideratum is that a phenomenology of noise should offer an *experientially pluralistic* account of noise, that is, an account that does not

<sup>2</sup>One exception here would be Hydralli (2012). However, the blanket definition of noise as resulting from the “inversion of the foreground and the background” (ibid., 225) raises a few questions. For one thing, it seems to exclude that there could ever be an experience of noise *in* the ‘background’ of, for example, some perception. That seems unlikely. Furthermore, if the needle jumping across a scratched record being played manifests acoustic noise, it is not clear that this noise has much to do with the inversion of some background or foreground among other potential counterexamples. Lastly, one can have reservations about relying upon Serres’s pronouncements about noise for the purposes of furnishing a *phenomenological* understanding of noise (given Serres’s ambivalent stance toward both ‘phenomenology’ and whether there can be a ‘phenomenon of noise’).

limit noise to only one experiential domain. On one formulation, this idea is that noise ought to be understood as falling within a broad range of sensory or perceptual experiences, that is, that there may be visual, acoustic, or even tactile or olfactory noise. Apart from the question whether noise as an element within human experience may have some essential features, the idea here is that the entities and environments in respect of which it may be encountered may not.

An initial justification for this desideratum is empirical. While it is not clear whether for every kind of human experience there is some corresponding form of noise, it seems that within philosophy of perception and contemporary cognitive science, as well as in other human sciences—musicology, aesthetics, information theory—theorists seems open to and interested in noise experiences which are, at a minimum, not merely acoustic in character.<sup>3</sup> That appeal to the crowd notwithstanding, it is not hard to find reasons for not restricting noise to just one sensorial domain, for instance for not taking noise as solely belonging to the acoustic domain, or, alternatively, for not taking acoustic noise as paradigmatic for any and all experiences of noise. First, to take an example, when entering a very busy place, like a carnival, one might experience it as full of noise, but there seems to be more to that experience than the acoustic stimuli furnished by that environment. One might feel disoriented or discomfited by the carnival's noise—either pleasingly or displeasingly—yet it seems implausible that such an impression could solely be imputed to or grounded in the acoustic facets of that situation. Second, one can think that there is nothing essential or invariable about the way the sensory apparatuses humans dispose of are configured to detect certain stimuli and certain entities; it is not inconceivable that there could be a creature that sees sound and hears light. On that premise, 'our' human acoustic noise would be 'their' visual noise, and vice versa, and thus there may be nothing essentially, for example ocular or aural, or luminescent or vibrational, about the experience of noise.<sup>4</sup> For such reasons, it seems

<sup>3</sup>As a brief demonstration of the currency of this idea across different fields, versions of it can be found, among other places, in Truax (1984), Bailey (1996), Chion (2016), Malaspina (2018), and Aston et al. (2023). On the idea of olfactory noise, cf. Masciari (2022).

<sup>4</sup>This point is made by Casati and Dokic (1994, 27–28) in reference to a thought experiment of Kripke's, in arguing against the idea of sensory modality essentialism, that is, that light could only be seen, that sounds or vibrations could only be heard. By contrast, they argue that 'sonic sensations allow for the reference of the auditive faculty to be fixed, but that they do not contribute to its definition.'

preferable not to reduce the understanding of the sensory experience of noise to just one sensorial domain, such as the acoustic.<sup>5</sup>

I should note here that there is a much more challenging way of understanding this first desideratum; the experiential pluralism of noise may go far beyond noise being *sensorially multimodal*. An attentive observer will have noted this implication from the citations above. Casati and Cavanagh, in claiming that shadows can seem like noise, attribute noise to some object of perception or some features of one's perceptual environment. By contrast, in discussing either the inexact, dynamic 'flickering' of colour perception or the phenomena of *eigengrau* or *eigengrau* ('graininess of the visual field'), Hellie (2005) and Gert (2021) respectively claim that there can be phenomenal noise as part of (visual) perceiving itself—noise that is in and of perception, as it were. Sands and Rately and Kahneman claim respectively claim that we can be subject to noise as a consequence of 'overloaded' or faulty operations of mind. In such diverse attributions, the sceptic of noise—doubtful for instance of whether the concept of noise names a cohesive kind of event or feature—will find excellent grist for their mill. How can something be (all of) a feature of the world or the object of perception, a feature of one's perceiving, and a feature of mental operations performed in respect of one's perception? Indeed, this is a quite a challenge, yet a phenomenology of noise would ultimately have to address it, at least if only to say something about which of the above domains (if not others) are those in which an experience of noise can properly come about.

A second desideratum is that a phenomenology of noise should account for how noise is taken up by individuals, how it is something they experience, whether in one domain or another. Under what guise or guises, so to speak, does noise appear? This desideratum is premised upon the idea of there is something distinct about noise experiences as such, and it is not as obvious as it might first seem. That is, here as well one can run up against some scepticism.<sup>6</sup> First off, there can be scepticism about whether there is much to be said about experiences of noise as such; one might think they lack any particular kind of appearance of their own. An

<sup>5</sup>For an account that discusses 'noise' predominantly with respect to the acoustic domain, cf. Kulvicki (2008).

<sup>6</sup>N.b. the sceptical positions being discussed here are not the same as the last; that is, one can be sceptical of whether noise is a phenomenal kind without being sceptical of whether there is such a thing as noise.

unequivocal, if recondite, position here is Serres's ('noise cannot be a phenomenon,' 1995, 13 ff.), for whom noise is the 'excluded third' of the informational basis from which human experience takes shape; given the supporting, albeit intrinsically and invariably hidden role of noise in experience, it does not and cannot appear as such.<sup>7</sup> Relatedly, there can also be scepticism about whether there can be a phenomenology of noise; that is, that phenomenology, as a kind of philosophical methodology or style adhering to certain premises, seems noise-adverse or noise-incapable. On such a construal, 'phenomenology' can only postulate noise as being on the hither side of its explananda—for example, being, meaning, totality—and this because of its bias toward conceiving experience in terms of intentional structures, concepts, and meanings, and the forms of knowledge that such conceptual endeavours would allow for.<sup>8</sup>

Again, the fact that noise and noisiness are within contemporary philosophical discourse non-exceptional *phenomenal* descriptors—for certain kinds of perception, for instance—seems enough of a reason to resist scepticism regarding phenomena or the phenomenology of noise. Another consideration here is that human beings, in our age at least, embrace practices and technologies of both noise coping (cf. Torre, this volume) and noise diminishment (e.g. 'silence tourism'), and of noise cultivation (noise art), depending on their practical and evaluative (e.g. aesthetic) aims. The existence of these practices and technologies would seem to support, at least indirectly, the notion that noise is indeed something experienced, and not for instance a purely scientific phenomenon foreign to the human experiential domain.

Yet if noise is a non-exceptional experience, how is such noise given or undergone, where clarifying as much would be a core aim of a phenomenology of noise? An important datum here, drawing upon the premises of the first desideratum, may be that there may be a rich spectrum indeed of experiences that involve noise. For instance, noise need not only be described as the negation or cancellation of some meaningful experience;<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>On Serres's reliance on information theory as the basis for his view of noise, cf. Eriksson (2008).

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Benoist (2013, 194) for a representative position.

<sup>9</sup>Versions of this view—that noise is only ever a derivative concept, relative to some experience of meaning—might be found in either Heidegger (1962, 207 (164); cf. Pellizzer, this volume) or Merleau-Ponty. While the latter does not often explicitly refer to noise (at least, qua "*bruit*")—it is mentioned mostly in relation to understanding words and conversations—when he does so, 'noise' simply seems to be the opposite of whatever is meaningful. C.f. Merleau-Ponty (2012, 137, 190); (1973, 115–16).

this is in line with the thought, put by Malaspina (2018, 168), that noise may be as much about what is ‘going right’ within experience, as about what is going wrong in it. By way of example, for some persons, the noisy surroundings of a busy pub can seem helpful for writing or reading something; far from being a distortion or disturbance, and thus far from needing to be cancelled, the noise of the pub furnishes something like a cocoon in which one’s practice of reading or writing can flourish.<sup>10</sup> And in view of how certain artists seek to manifest noise under one form or another in their works, it seems reductive to think that the only manner they do so in such works is by seeking to disrupt or ‘cancel’ one’s perceptions.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, mapping the phenomenal character of noise experiences—that is, fulfilling this second desideratum—would entail two things: on the one hand, accounting for what is distinctly common or constant across (diverse) experiences of noise; on the other, accounting for how noise can be encountered or undergone under varying guises. The first issue concerns the ‘salient’ phenomenal character of noise experiences.<sup>12</sup> The second is that of the basic forms of phenomenal variance of noise. Let us consider each in more detail.

<sup>10</sup>All the same, my research ( $n = 1$ ) has shown that some kinds of busy pubs can seem too loud to be able to do any reading or writing. This suggests that loudness and noisiness as experiential features of certain situations are not perfectly correlated and may not be a function of each other. See below for more on the obtrusiveness of noise.

<sup>11</sup>Some art may be understood to incorporate noise by seeking to disrupt its audience’s experience, but that hardly seems to be the only manner in which noise is taken up in artistic practices and works of art. Numerous examples could be cited here in terms of music (Merzbow, Varèse, Sun Ra), but for a visual example of the latter such noise art, one might think of Thomas Ruff’s *nudes* or *jpeg*s series of images, as commented on by Hainge (2013, 209 ff.) and Kane (2016).

<sup>12</sup>Two comments about the notion of ‘phenomenal character’ are needed. First, under more classical approaches, such an account of the phenomenal character of noise or ‘what it’s like to experience noise’ would represent only a small part of the sorts of questions that phenomenological philosophy ought to treat. Within the scope of this chapter, I take clarifying the phenomenal character of noise to be a contribution to a number of current philosophical discussions—for the philosophy of perception and for aesthetics, to name but two—however one conceives of the aims of ‘phenomenology.’

Second, per Mehta (2022), in current discussions ‘phenomenal character’ does different things for different people. Here, I take the notion to align with what he calls ‘perceptual character’: namely, citing John Campbell, those aspects of experience which ‘explai[n] our grasp of the concepts of the categorial properties’ of that which we experience (ibid., 220–21).

Things, events, and situations can seem very noisy or a little noisy or not noisy at all. One question that this datum raises is what one's experience is like in the one case or another; what is it that one is being made aware of or undergoing with respect to, for example, some situation that is a little noisy or quite noisy? And what is missing when a situation does not seem noisy? One's suspicion here might be that when faced with these questions, some authors might point to either randomness, chaos, clutter, or scatter as the basic property or properties of noise, and might thereby insist that the phenomenal character of the experience of noise is simply 'the presentation of [such] properties in experience.'<sup>13</sup> These descriptors of noise as some aspect of the world or one's interface with it may not be completely off the mark, but still leave a lot to be desired; is all randomness, clutter, or chaos noise?<sup>14</sup> And what can then be said about randomness, clutter, or chaos—how are they constituted as phenomenal properties of entities and situations, and how are they related to each other? In light of these issues, another path may be taken, that of specifying some specific feature of *the experience of* noise—what is constant about it—across different cases and circumstances of noise.<sup>15</sup> How is noise salient in perceptual

<sup>13</sup>Here, glossing Siegel (2017, 45) as one such account. The idea of noise as randomness, scatter, or chaos can be found in the accounts of Bogen and Woodward (2010), Kahneman et al. (2021), and Hellie (2005).

<sup>14</sup>For views disputing whether noise can be identified with randomness, cf., for example, Edmunds (2009) and Truax (1984).

<sup>15</sup>A doubt could be raised as to whether it makes sense to speak of some 'phenomenal character' of noise or noise experiences. Its basis would be that 'phenomenal character' refers to the mode of one's experience; what it is like to perceive, imagine, abstractly reflect, and so on. This would mean that the phenomenal character of a noise experience is simply the phenomenal character of the mode in which one encounters such (presumptive) noise; for example, it is simply the phenomenal character of a perception, of a reflection, or the like.

I'm not sure this concern undermines the thrust of the question being raised here. First, if it is plausible that an important aspect of encountering noise is often (if not always) to undergo an interfering with or inhibiting of a certain mode of experience, it seems unsatisfactory to claim that the phenomenal character of a perceptual experience of noise reduces to the phenomenal character of a perception; for the crux of the question in such cases lies in how it is that one is *not* perceiving optimally or normally, and what that is like (as distinguished from regular cases of perception). Second, it seems viable to enquire into the phenomenal character of specific types of a mode of experience; shame may share the phenomenal character of an emotion with other emotional experiences, but shame also seems to have a phenomenal character that is distinctive to it, which is worth understanding. Lastly, exploring the phenomenal character of noise experiences furnishes an attractive way to explore the phenomenology of noise while putting on hold some nettlesome questions: questions such as whether it makes sense to refer to noise as a 'content' of one's experience (conceptual or otherwise), whether noise can be the subject of a representation, whether noise has presentational features, and the like.

experience, for instance, *in light of* some encounter with randomness or chaos? The premise behind this approach is that descriptions of one's experiencing noise, that is, of the phenomenal character of such experiences, need not be conflated with claims about what noise involves as a feature of something.

A specification of the phenomenal character of noise—as motivating the idea that there is something like a broad, unified class of experiences of noise—is arguably missing from many contemporary accounts that purport to discuss the role of noise in perception or cognition. For instance, in Gert (2021), little is said about why the phenomenon of '*eigenlicht*' ought to be understood as noise in the first place; one might like to know what makes it seem like noise; why it is warranted to claim that when '*eigenlicht*' takes place, 'the phenomenon of visual noise pervades one's whole visual field' (2021, 6617).<sup>16</sup> The same might be said for Sorensen (2008); if he calls shadows noise and refers to their potential to 'confuse,' it is not completely clear what makes shadows noise; is it their potential to confuse, or something else? Certainly, not all types of noise experience seem or need to be 'confusing' experiences; the acoustic noise of the jackhammer and the restaurant are both arguably telling something quite informative or useful about the world, at least depending on one's purposes.<sup>17</sup>

In pointing to the so-called salience of noise—the specific phenomenal character of its experience—a fine-grained distinction is called for. It is easy to confuse the salience of noise with how noise can seem more or less pressingly or obtrusively experienced. However, these two aspects of the experience of noise ought to be kept carefully apart. Something can seem very noisy—that is, quite 'saliently' noisy—without it being obtrusively noisy.<sup>18</sup> A couple of examples can make this clear. Someone working at the pass of a restaurant may find that on a certain day the place seems particularly noisy as compared to the days previous. Suppose this person goes to

<sup>16</sup>Something similar can be said for Morrison (2012), which while referring explicitly to the phenomenal character of visual noise says little about what that is taken to involve.

<sup>17</sup>This idea can be found in Simondon, for whom 'social noise' can be crucially informative about one's environment and its threats and boons (2010, 93). Truax (1984, 88) stresses that 'noise in the sense of information that is unpatterned and unordered by the brain, is the only source of new information.'

<sup>18</sup>Gert (2021, 6617) seems to have something similar in mind on this point regarding the case of visual noise: 'With one's eyes open and under greater illumination the phenomenon is still present, though more elusive.'

the freezer in the back to catch a breather. The freezer is not completely soundproof, so this person can still hear the restaurant. In such a case, it seems reasonable to think that this person would still be able to detect from the freezer that the restaurant is very, that is, quite saliently, noisy that day. But such an experience of noise is not an obtrusive experience of noise; this is what makes the freezer an oasis from the noise.<sup>19</sup> What then is it that they are recognising, on the assumption that they not simply identifying the *sound* of the restaurant ('the restaurant is what I hear from within the freezer'), but recognising the noisiness of the restaurant ('Even from in here, I hear how noisy it is out there')? Would our putative chef in the freezer only be pointing to the *loudness* of the restaurant on that particular day, or would they be perceiving something else? That 'something else,' if it is reasonable to assume as much, is what would be at stake in the salience of noise.<sup>20</sup>

An analogous example can also be given in terms of visual perception, if shadows are considered a form of visual noise (per Casati and Cavanagh 2019; Chirimuuta 2015; Sorensen 2008).<sup>21</sup> If one is driving in the forest on a very sunny day, in a car with a very dirty windshield, the shadows can seem like an obtrusive, if not occlusive, form of noise; their rapid flickering and variation can make it hard to see the road, because one must constantly reorient how one looks out of the windshield. In these circumstances, one might pull over and give one's windshield a quick wipe down. In such a case—after the attempt to clean the windshield—the noise of the shadows would be less obtrusive, but still salient; their noisiness would still be apparent even if they no longer made driving in the forest quite so

<sup>19</sup>These examples - of the restaurant and driving in the forest - are inspired by Casati and Dokic's discussion (1994, 69) of "sonic images." They point out how, when speaking to someone (such as 'Marie') on the telephone, that person's voice can seem noisy, even when the sound coming through the line is quite faint, for instance because of a bad connection. I should add here that with the implementation of noise cancellation and multiple microphone technologies in mobile phones, and the latter's vanquishing of analogue phones, this phenomenon - the salient noisiness of Marie's voice due to her anger, despite the faintness of the line - may now be less familiar to some than it might have been in the past.

<sup>20</sup>A further supporting consideration here is that aesthetic works and practices incorporating forms of noise do not only manifest the obtrusiveness (e.g. the loudness) of some noise, but rather its salience in the sense just outlined. Indeed, the salience of noise as opposed to some obtrusiveness may be one of the most important characteristics of the noise manifest in some such works.

<sup>21</sup>On Chirimuuta's pragmatist account (2015, 91, 94), colour perception helps cope with the confusing 'noise' of shadow shapes and their dynamic movements.

difficult.<sup>22</sup> Still, if these examples show that there can be a salience of noise that remains detectable even when other factors in its experience vary, the question remains as to how best to account such salience, how to account for what is undergone as noise, *despite* its being more or less obtrusive, for instance. Here we can note that also colours or sounds may be said, under certain circumstances, to be salient, as when they are adjacent to other colours or sounds. Yet that seems to be a different question from the one concerning what it is that gives noise a salience, that is, what it is like to be presented with noise, such that it is salient in experience.

Above, I floated the idea that, apart from being more or less salient, noise can also be more or less obtrusive; that is, noise can be more or less difficult to ‘escape,’ to direct one’s attention around or away from. This idea touches upon the second face of the second desideratum: what are the basic types of variance in the experience of noise? If it is plausible to think that there are many different types of experiences of noise, what are the most prominent manners in which such experiences may differ? Here too there is much to say. I shall here limit consideration to two such types of variance, drawn from how noise currently garners interest: the aforementioned more or less obtrusive character of noise, and the evaluative character of noise. Both invite much further investigation.

Once the obtrusiveness of noise is distinguished from its salience, the very idea of the obtrusiveness of noise itself calls for further distinctions and gradations.<sup>23</sup> Some kinds of noise can seem very obtrusive, to the point of being either intrusive or occlusive; here one can think of how some noise might either interrupt or distort one’s experience, where the relation between these two types of ‘disturbances’ raises difficult questions. Moreover, noise may be obtrusive in either the background (growling stomachs and coughs in concert halls) or the foreground of one’s perceptions (the sun-dappled windshield, the incomprehensible vocal or bodily gestures of the interlocutor), and may even be so obtrusive as to cut across any such distinction (the noise of the gale, the noise of the art installation). That noise can have an obtrusiveness is obvious enough in cases of acoustic perception; one can try to ignore a fire drill in order to

<sup>22</sup>This idea that there can be a salience of noise that can vary independently of noise being obtrusive in one’s experiences correlates well with Hellie’s claim (2005, 493) that noise can be “phenomenally manifest” without necessarily being easily noticeable or “introspectible.”

<sup>23</sup>For a consonant view—albeit one that claims to be ‘non-phenomenological’—exploring the obtrusiveness and inconspicuousness of noise, cf. Malaspina (2018, 171).

keep on working, but then, one's concentration will be shattered in the face of a quite testing feature of one's environment. Yet noise may seem more or less obtrusive not only due to the intensity of what is perceived or due to the environmental factors that constrain or promote one's perception. Noise can also be more or less obtrusive in function of the competences (perceptual, cognitive, practical etc.) of the individual confronting it. As an example of this, one can think of the ways in which individuals cope with noise on the background of their lives, and also of the manner in which noise may be a now-stronger, now-fainter aspect of one's environment or one's experiential apparatus. A visitor entering a restaurant may find it obtrusively noisy, but such noise may seem much less obtrusive to someone working on the pass, for whom it is the background of their everyday undertakings. For the chef, the noise is less obtrusive, because they are able to disregard or overlook it, yet it still makes sense to say that they experience it, even if does not affect them in the same way as the visitor.

If it seems plausible that the obtrusiveness of noise calls for some careful distinctions, so does its opposite—whatever would lie at its obverse end, as the experience of less-obtrusive noise. An important nuance here is that the experience of noise that is less obtrusive or more inconspicuous (disregarded, diminished, coped with, 'silenced') ought not be conflated with *obliviousness to* or ignorance of noise, even if the former at its limit converges upon the latter. The point of this distinction is that only the former may still properly count as noise that 'appears' or that is experienced; at least, this is on the assumption that for something to count as an experience, one must be able to be aware of what it is that one is experiencing, either via a perceptual or a cognitive capacity of one's part or due to environmental factors that provide one with a disposition to such awareness.<sup>24</sup> According to the idea that there can be experience of less-obtrusive noise, the claim is that one nonetheless has a sensitivity to or a perceiving of such noise, which when lacking would leave one merely unaware of that noise. In other words, even in cases of less-obtrusive noise, its salience is not eradicated.

Sorensen provides justification for this distinction, in comparing adult perceptual competence in relation to shadows to that of young children.

<sup>24</sup>In this I diverge from Dretske's notion that there can be perception without awareness (i.e. of a 'spy') (2002); from how I understand phenomenal character, such an episode would not merit being called an experience of a spy.

On his view, it is because of adults' 'sensitivity' to shadows and to what they show about the world that shadows can sometimes be 'exploitable' to 'process' the visual scene, and sometimes be 'noise.' Ostensibly, children with their lesser 'understanding' of shadows (Sorensen) would not experience shadows as noise as adults would, if at all (2008, 10). This means that shadows cannot be 'noisy' for such children as they would be for adults, not even as a less-obtrusive or inconspicuous noise. This is inasmuch as adults have a sensitivity to shadows and also the competence to disregard them; children would by his lights not have such 'sensitivity' and so would not experience such 'silent' or backgrounded noise (*ibid.*). To sum up, the 'silencing' of noise is not obliviousness to noise. The experience of noise invites practices, behaviour, embodiment, and 'silenced' noise is still something one can comport oneself toward (for instance, by reverting attention toward it); the oblivion of noise is not.

Another crucial type of phenomenal variance of noise plays out *evaluatively*. If noise is often taken to be a bad thing, it is not always experienced that way. In some cases, it can seem good or be enjoyed; in others, it might leave one neutral. There are many puzzles here, but a phenomenological question is how experiences of noise of the one or other evaluative character are related; what do they have in common, and how do they differ?<sup>25</sup> A couple of examples can make this question concrete. Consider: the invasive noise of jackhammers or the insidious noise of bustling, garishly decorated airports can seem bad.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the noise one encounters at sea cliffs during a gale—visual no less than acoustic—can seem to have something breathtaking, sublime about it. Likewise, in certain performances of noise music, in certain forms of installation art, or in certain forms of film (e.g. *In Vanda's Room* (Costa 2000)), something beautiful or incredible can be encountered, which is precisely due to their embodying or manifesting noise.<sup>27</sup> Apart from the question of what makes *each* distinct form of noise or the other seem bad or good, there is the question of what aspect or facet of noise or noisiness is being evaluated as

<sup>25</sup>For an account of noise as negative evaluative experiences, cf. Roberts (2021).

<sup>26</sup>This is under the assumption that we do not describe things as noise because they are bad, but rather describe things as bad because they are noise. This fits with everyday intuitions of noise, at least; noise can be an explanation for a journey's badness or an artwork's goodness, but badness and goodness are not an explanation for something's being noise or not.

<sup>27</sup>I take this to be a different issue than that of the evaluative variance of phenomenal noise across or within subjects (cf. Introduction).

good or bad in each case; is there some common feature of noise which is being evaluated differently in each case, or does each evaluation pick out something different about noise?<sup>28</sup> Is that which makes the noise of the airport unbearable that which makes the noise of the sea cliffs magnificent? This variance can also obtain with respect to a seemingly identical form of noise. The noise of the city can in one case seem tiresome or hateful, yet in another case the same noise (or one quite similar) can seem worthy of aesthetic appreciation, as when incorporated in a work by John Cage; yet is that which makes the noise of the city hateful that which makes it sublime in *4'33''*?<sup>29</sup> These considerations point to a question about the phenomenal variance of noise in terms of its evaluative character; there is a need to explore how experiences of noise can range from the good to the bad, where this question is distinct from that of why one or other *specific* form of noise may seem good or bad. Again, if the reasons for why noise may seem good or bad may be manifold, how are they related to the phenomenal properties of noise or the phenomenal character of its experience (if these are not taken to be identical)? At a minimum, a phenomenology of noise should allow for some sort of progress concerning what it is about noise that allows or engenders its evaluative experience in one valence or another.<sup>30</sup>

These then are two key aims around which a descriptive theory of experiences of noise can be built. Such an account ought to address the apparent experiential plurality of noise, and it ought to investigate both what remains constant (what is salient) and what varies (obtrusiveness, evaluativity) in the phenomenal character of noise. There is much opportunity for philosophical debate on them. Are they on the right track? Are they the most important desiderata? Spurring such discussion may help contribute to a phenomenological perspective on the experience of noise.

<sup>28</sup> Again, evaluations of noise may differ from subject to subject, but that is not the question here.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of the (anti-)aesthetics of noise in Cage's work, cf. Dokic (1998).

<sup>30</sup> Some caveats here. First, this is not an exhaustive charting of the variances in the experience of noise. Second, while these two sorts of variance have been presented as oppositions, it does not mean they do not permit gradations. There may be various gradations in the obtrusiveness of noise, which can also vary dynamically. To map the experience of noise, a phenomenology of noise ought to be able to recognise such continuous and dynamic variance in the first place, if not clarify how and why it comes about.

### 3 THREE VIEWS OF THE PHENOMENAL CHARACTER OF NOISE EXPERIENCES

With these desiderata in hand, let's look at some current views of the experience of noise. I first want to consider the following two:

*Epistemic misfire (EM)*: in undergoing perceptual noise, one does not manage to know what it is that one perceives, and one's own grasping of this epistemic failure of one's perception is distinctive for what it is like to experience perceptual noise

*Sensory misfire (SM)*: in undergoing perceptual noise, one is inhibited from perceiving as such, and this inhibition of access to the world, its entities, and their properties is distinctive for what it is like to experience perceptual noise

Why have these views been selected? First, both can be understood as satisfying the first of the two desiderata; they are pluralistic when it comes to experiences of noise, in that they can accommodate noise phenomena across different sensory modalities. Second, these views are being considered because they seem to be at stake in some recent philosophy, particularly the philosophy of perception, at least where certain philosophers have entertained that the notion that noise under some form or other has some impact there. That is, they are representative of how *some* philosophers furnish premises for answering the questions, 'What is it that one undergoes in the experience of noise? What distinguishes *the experience* of noise?' This entails that by considering these views, the discussion of the experience of noise will be oriented toward *perceptual experiences* of noise.<sup>31</sup> In other words, I will solely consider their relevance to questions concerning experiences of noise that fall within the perceptual domain. This is a matter of scope as much as anything else; the net thus far cast is wide enough.<sup>32</sup>

With these stipulations in place, the procedure will be as follows: to exemplify each such view in recent discussions, to explore what is at stake

<sup>31</sup>Hence, the views I will examine will not be considered in terms of whether they can allow for a 'experientially pluralistic' account of the experience of noise in the expansive sense floated above.

<sup>32</sup>Something similar could be said here for the fact that all the views I will consider here cast the experience of noise in 'negative' terms: *misfire*, *disjoint*. While the question of a 'positive' description of the perceptual experience of noise is important, it is likewise outside my scope, as the perspectives on perception on which I am drawing largely cast noise in such negative terms.

in such a view of the experience of noise, and to evaluate each view with respect to the desideratum of specifying the phenomenal character of noise. Cutting to the chase, I will argue that neither of these first two views suffices to specify the phenomenal character of perceptual noise, although each view provides some clues as to what that might involve.

### 3.1 *Epistemic Misfire*

The broad idea behind this view is that perceptual noise inhibits one from knowing what one is perceiving, and the inhibition of knowledge through perception is distinctive for what it is like to experience such noise.<sup>33</sup> One possible warrant for this view is the common-sense intuition that perceptual noise often underlies one's mistaking the properties of some thing or things, such as the tint of a tumbler glass sitting in the sun, or what someone is saying during or after a Peter Brötzmann concert. These examples point to how certain 'noisy' factors involved in one's perception, like the brownness of the table or the blueness of the sky, or the loud harshness of the saxophone, may challenge how well that perception performs, in a way that other factors—such as geometric patterns cut into the glass—do not. Some such 'noisy' factors may be environmental, such as the lighting and shading of the object in relation to other objects in one's perceptual field. Another set may lie with perceiving individuals themselves and their embodiment: for instance, as an aspect of one's visual system as mode of interface with the world, if not also of one's emotional or cognitive states when engaging in a perception. Yet on the EM view of perceptual noise, the source or specific type of such noise matters relatively little, as compared to its effect on the individual attempting to perceive the world. Namely, experiences of perceptual noise are marked by a failure to come to grips with the world through perception, and the awareness of such failure furnishes a clear bar for establishing when one experiencing noise or not.

Among those who could be seen to fall within such a view in light of their discussions of perceptual noise would be Morrison (2012), Sorensen

<sup>33</sup>There is a question here as to whether only disjunctive or so-called world-involving theories of perception (Brewer 1999, 72) would be liable to hold such a view of the phenomenal character of perceptual noise, on account of how they conceive the relation between perceiving and (one important kind of) knowing. It seems to me that EM and its concerns are relevant for any theory of perception which holds that what is phenomenally given in perception has an important grounding role for knowledge.

(2008), and Kahneman et al. (2021).<sup>34</sup> Such a view moreover seems to align with Dretske's 'technical sense' of noise, which sidesteps the idea that there is anything like noise 'in itself' or non-relational noise. Rather, for Dretske, noise reflects the proportion ('measurement') according to which a certain informational situation *R* exhibits divergence from an informational situation *S* which *R* ought to be dependent upon (1981, 16). Interpolating this definition in terms of (phenomenal) experience, my perception *R* of some situation *S* (the tumbler glass on the table, in its tint) is noisy to the extent that it diverges from what that situation *S* *really is* and what *S* should be grounding *as* my perception. And my perception *R* of the glass would *constitute an experience of noise* to the extent that I would be aware of that divergence; to the extent that I could be aware of my perception as 'falsidical,' to use Chalmers's term (2006, 50). Such a view is clearly instantiated in Casati and Cavanagh's idea that 'noisy' shadows can lead to 'confusing' and inaccurate extraction of visual information about the shape, size, movement, and material constitution of objects in one's visual field (2019, 103–4). Yet epistemic misfire may not only arise from some 'noise of the world,' like shadows; it may also stem from faults or limitations of one's own perceptual apparatus. Hence, a view of noise in line with EM also seems at issue in Hellie's 'phenomenological argument' for the 'the unavoidable presence of noise in perception.' By the latter, he means noise in one's visual system, which surfaces when one might concentrate on distinguishing two colours that seem quite close to or identical with each other, even as one has reason to think they should not be. In such cases, according to Hellie, the phenomenal character of the perception affected with noise is made salient or 'manifest' *not* in some aspect of the colours 'themselves,' nor in some faulty or limited characteristic of one's visual system; he takes such determinations as irrelevant to his phenomenological argument. Rather the perceptual noise is salient in how 'it

<sup>34</sup>Despite their explicit interest in judgements, Kahneman et al. (2021) can be grouped here insofar as at least some of the judgements that they are concerned with are judgements erroneously grounded in certain perceptions. One might also wonder whether Siegel's notion of "hijacked experience" (2017), at least in a couple of its forms, could also fall under this rubric if a place for noise were sought within her account of perceptual experience and its variable "epistemic charge." Lastly, Dennett might also be numbered among those able to be grouped within an EM view; in (1991) he describes noise or "random noise" as that which interferes with one's ability to "know" which patterns one is seeing (34). However, given the contested status of the notion of 'experience' in Dennett's view (i.e. whether it is a 'fiction'), I am hesitant to stress this connection.

strikes one as if one perceives colours *inexactly* due to random noise' (2005, 482, 487, emphasis added).<sup>35</sup>

To be clear, if I am taking these (if not other) authors to align with the EM view, it must be noted that none of them are claiming that the EM view furnishes a definitive description of the phenomenal character of perceptual noise (though Hellie perhaps comes closest to such a claim). Nor, in fairness, can they be said to be concerned with giving a robust account of the phenomenal character of perceptual noise as such. Yet in that there precisely lies a question: *should* EM be taken as paradigmatic for the phenomenal character of perceptual noise? This seems like an important question for whoever might be interested in the relation between noise and perception, and also for those who would leverage 'phenomenological arguments' in favour of one or other thesis about perception. And on that question, there are a couple of reasons to have hesitations here. One worry has to do with how there are not a few examples of perceptual noise to which EM seems ill-fitted. The second worry is that EM, while leveraging an intuitive link between noise and knowledge via perception, incurs some pretty chunky problems once we delve deeper into what kind of claim it amounts to regarding *misfires* of perception.

The first worry can be framed relatively straightforwardly. Namely, it is not clear that perception has to fail at all in its epistemic role in order for there to be an experience of noise. If this is a real worry, then at the very least EM does not seem able to bring forward a necessary aspect of the phenomenal character of perceptual noise. A couple of examples can bring this point home. About Idhe's 'detestable, (...) unwanted noise of the jackhammer early in the morning' (2007, 81), it seems hard to justify that EM has some role to play there, in how one would be undergoing its noise. A similar point could be made about Casati and Dokic's example of someone's voice heard over a phone line; in a brief discussion of 'sonic images,' they posit a case in which someone ('Marie') can be heard to be raising their voice—perhaps because they are upset or because of the environment in which they are calling—in a way which makes their voice seem 'noisy' [*bruyant*] (1994, 69). It would be odd to describe such an example

<sup>35</sup>Hardin (1988) may also be aligned with this view. In his study of colour perception (ibid., 174), visual noise is experienced as the indeterminacy of portions of one's visual field, where such experiences are salient precisely when one can detect visual occurrences at the borders of one's visual field without being able to determine what they are—their colour, for instance.

in terms of some failed epistemic outcome of one's perception. To the contrary, one might think that in such an example one is managing to perceive Marie's voice quite well, and indeed even that the recognition that Marie is raising her voice is at least partly supported *by* the perceived noisiness of her voice.

If these examples are indicative of where there may be some problems for the EM view, they are not yet conclusive; a view of perceptual noise consistent with EM might dispute whether the above are fair examples of perceptual noise, and might also claim that other intuitive examples fit EM rather well. Yet there is a second worry about the EM view. This basically has to do with challenging questions such as the following: 'what is it like *not* to know the world through perception? What is it like *not* to correctly grasp the way the world *is* through perception?' Now, in broaching such questions, it must be noted that there are quite some controversies regarding whether and how there can even be an 'epistemic misfire' of perception in the first place, let alone a phenomenally accessible type of this misfire: that is, regarding whether or how perceptions are veridical, how perceptions can support epistemic beliefs, whether and how perception constitutes access or acquaintance with the world.<sup>36</sup> But let's assume for the moment a rudimentary foundationalist stance which holds that perceptions directly furnish evidence for having certain beliefs about the world.<sup>37</sup> Under such a stance, the EM view can be shown to suffer from serious ambiguities.

Consider the classic example of seeing something in the woods which seems to be either a bush or a bear.<sup>38</sup> A question arises about this case when we consider that there seem to be no less than two manners of undergoing epistemic misfire (due to the flitting shadows, the poor visibility, or one's fallible visual system), which under the EM view could count

<sup>36</sup> Again, such concerns would have little bearing on those views of perception which deny it any such epistemic role; the latter would then have to bring in other considerations regarding the phenomenal character of perceptual noise. The manner in which the epistemic role of perception is conceived can have quite an impact on how noise and its experience are conceived.

<sup>37</sup> Although this foundationalist picture of the relation of perception to knowledge faces difficulties, the challenges for EM are perhaps not alleviated when one would turn to more complex contemporary accounts of the question of whether and how perception grounds knowledge, via evidence or 'seemings' or other means.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Strawson (2019 (1966), 150–51) and Wrathall (2009) for discussion of this kind of case.

as an experience of perceptual noise. In one case, one sees the bush for the bear, or vice versa; thus, the form that EM may be said to take is that of a *mistaken* perception. One sees an  $x$  for a  $y$ , and then one way or another one comes to perceive *that* one has been mistaking  $x$  for  $y$ . One not only sees things in the wrong way but also discovers that one is seeing things the wrong way. By contrast, one might also be unable to make out what it is that one is seeing; it might seem like either a bush or a bear, or indeed it may be something else.<sup>39</sup> This case of *deterred* or contested perception can also be described as a case of epistemic misfire; this is so to the extent that due to the nature of one's perception it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to know what it is that one is seeing, and thereby to know something through seeing. For instance, due to environmental factors, one would not be able to make out what is going on with the properties available perceptually, or through perception one finds oneself only able to make out certain properties of the object, that is, attribute or ascribe them as appertaining properly, but not others.

These two cases of EM, when considered from a phenomenological perspective, seem crucially different from each other. In the former case, that of the mistaking the bush for the bear, or vice versa, noise is arguably not (phenomenally) salient *in* the mistaking of the bear for the bush. But for some factor external to one's initial perception or set of perceptions—for example, if one had never tried to pick berries off the bear—one would have remained oblivious to the epistemic misfire and the perceptual noise it would indicate. The mistaken perception seemed fine up until the moment when it didn't any longer. In the case of the deterred perception, something else is going on. One is not hallucinating something non-existent, or simply mistaking one perceptual feature (or set of features) for another. Rather, one sees, and it very much seems like one is seeing, yet such seeming has much to do with how one struggles to make out what it is that one is seeing. One is seeing *something*, and yet what that something is remains something of a mystery, even if only for a moment. What one perceives, or at least certain aspects or parts of what one is perceiving, does not lead to knowledge of the world, not even mistaken knowledge; rather,

<sup>39</sup>Other examples could be given here. An example of tactile noise would be when a mechanic, after road-testing a car, discovers that the rear differential is introducing some noise into the road-feel of the car. Here again, the mechanic might mean that the problematic mechanism makes the road-feel of the car loose or overly responsive, or they equally plausibly might mean that such noise makes the road-feel of the car indeterminable.

one does not manage to make out what it is that one is perceiving. In the deterred perception we might say that veridicality (either misplaced or grounded) is not the most salient aspect of one's perception, because another challenge for one's perception can seem more important, namely regarding *what* of the world is being (phenomenally) given to one. This deterred aspect of the perception seems to be an important part of what it is like to have at least *certain* perceptions that seems to lead nowhere epistemically, that is, into uncertainty.<sup>40</sup>

Are there really any such deterred or contested perceptions? The cases of perceptual noise I have been considering give reason to think that there are. My perception seems contested by the noisy shadows of the trees on the dirty windshield; there is something about my looking through the windshield—and my making sense of the road ahead and of the actions to be taken with regards to it—that is being interfered with, as it were, in the here and now; *as* the shadows perceptually given, *as* I would perceive the road ahead. An analogous example is how the rhythm of some music may be difficult to make out, due to the erratic skips and scratching I hear while a record is playing.<sup>41</sup> One might say that in such cases the noisiness of the perception is immediately sensed or given, and is given *as part of the perception*. This would stand in contrast to how, once more, one discovers the 'misfire' of a *mistaken* perception through something *external* to that perception; for instance, some *further*, subsequent perceptual engagement with the world or some well-grounded belief that conflicts with the perception, such as the well-known fact that sticks do not break when they are placed in water. The immediately sensed or felt character of a deterred perception seems moreover like an apt description of the 'flickering and crepitation' that one senses in attempting to discriminate between colours, per Hellie's account (2005, 493); one's perception of the colours seems contested, not after the fact, but as one attempts to make sense of the

<sup>40</sup>It's not that all experiences of perceptual noise must take the form of a deterred perception; rather, that at least some deterred perceptions instantiate perceptual noise. Moreover, some instances of deterred perception may be more aptly described as cases of perceptual noise than others. The blurring of vision or the 'deadness of touch' (as when one's extremity falls asleep) may also make one feel that one's perception, visual or tactile, is being deterred, yet it might not be clear whether this should count as perceptual noise or not. Hellie claims that noise 'blurs' (2005, 506); Gert (2021) argues for their distinction.

<sup>41</sup>In terms of the latter such 'halfway perceptions,' another example is how one is less and less able to make out the properties of a square in some of Dennett's pixelated patterns in (1991, 31).

colours and their relation. It would seem important to know something about what it is that is given or presented (immediately or directly) *as part of one's experience* in the case of deterred perceptions, which is *not part of* the mistaken perception. Yet EM would have to demur on the matter. On such premises, the EM view would seem to fail to pick out something important about perceptual noise, or at least certain types of it.

Here is another way to understand why demurring on the specific phenomenal character of deterred perceptions creates a problem for the EM view. One can imagine a case of perception which is phenomenologically inconclusive as to whether one's perception is mistaken or deterred. This could, for instance, arise through multiple perceptions of one same object over a course of time. Namely, there might be a certain perception  $x$  at one moment, a different perception  $y$  at a second moment, and a further perception  $z$  at a third moment. In such a case, where the three perceptions are not matching, and where one is not sure which is successful, one could reasonably infer either that one's perceptions seems mistaken or that one's perceptions are being deterred, or both.<sup>42</sup> Crucially, on the EM view, such a determination would not matter and indeed would *never* matter. This is because, for the EM view, the core phenomenal marker for noise affecting one's perception is that one's perception was (epistemically) unsuccessful, that is, non-veridical. However, on the warrant that in certain cases *there is* an important phenomenal difference between a perception's being mistaken and its being deterred, something crucial seems missing from the EM view. Thus, while it might not be entirely off the mark to think that (perceptual) noise has something to do with our getting the world wrong, on this reasoning it would seem unlikely that EM can be the full picture regarding the phenomenal character of noise experiences. Experiences of perceptual noise ought not be conflated with epistemic experiences, at least if we would like to know what is specific to the former.

### 3.2 *Sensory Misfire*

The preceding analyses point in another direction for understanding the phenomenal character of perceptual noise. This other direction can be

<sup>42</sup>To the extent that one would have grounds to attribute such mismatching to perceptual noise, such a case would at most consist in an *indirect* experience of noise. Among the types of noise discussed by Kahneman et al. (2021, 71), this phenomenon would be closest to what they identify as 'level noise.'

seen if we consider once more how certain perceptions can seem noisy on account of their being deterred. We might like to know what is distinctive about such episodes—what it is like for perceptions to *seem* deterred. Some routes seem closed off for understanding the phenomenal character of such deterred perceptions. On the one hand, as was just seen, this distinctive character cannot simply be taken as a grasping of the perception's defective 'epistemic charge' (Siegel) or lack of veridicality with respect to what is perceived. Moreover, it does not seem viable to take the phenomenal character of such episodes simply to reduce to the phenomenal properties of what is given of the world in such episodes. That would miss the important point about such episodes; in deterred perceptions, it may be unclear either *which* phenomenal properties are being given to one or else how certain (basic) phenomenal properties relate or have significance with respect to each other. So, about such cases, one should not assume that we are simply being given *wrong or illusory* properties or relations of properties of entities in such cases.<sup>43</sup>

This point can be clarified with a further example of deterred perception. For instance, driving on a curvy, hilly highway on a quite misty night, where there are no streetlights, it may be quite difficult to discern where the mist stops and the road begins as I look ahead, even while in other parts of my visual field their respective properties seem distinct enough. It is not that I see the road and the mist as each part of some whole or as continuous with each other. Rather, I have trouble discriminating at some

<sup>43</sup> Although he is concerned with other cases of degradation of perception, such as blurring in visual experience, Lormand makes a related point in (2006, 323, note 11): 'What is required is an explanation of how one introspects that an experience *is* visual, and how one introspects what degree of degradation it has. It would be difficult, even if not impossible, to explain this by appeal only to introspection of objectual properties.' His point is that the phenomenal character of, say, a degraded (visual) perception shouldn't be thought of as presenting 'different features of objects' as compared to a non-degraded seeing. This is because degraded forms of perception need to be understood to produce not only illusory representations but also perceptions that seem themselves to be interfered with and that must be corrected for in light of such 'interference.' In other words, more or less 'difficult perceivings' must be coped with, not by *substituting* mistakenly perceived properties ( $x, y$ ) with correctly perceived ones ( $a, b$ ) but rather by adjusting for the distorting or disturbing of one's perceiving of certain properties. In these 'difficult perceivings,' we do not cope with 'wrong' properties being presented (or a mere absence of properties) but rather with the *manner* in which certain properties are presented in perception.

For a comparable view on what is given in 'degraded perceptions,' cf. Bourget (2015), although he leaves visual noise out of consideration when discussing 'perceptual distortion.'

moments where the one ends and the other begins, and how that information should guide my driving; my visual field seems constricted, where depth in the road and in the mist becomes difficult to pick out. On the assumption that this case constitutes an example of perceptual noise, this example suggests that such perceptual noise is not *first and foremost* distinguished, for the person undergoing it, by not being able to *know* the world, but rather, by not being able to perceive the world (or some aspects of it) as such. I see something and yet I cannot make it out. Is it road, is it mist, is it something else (a grey concrete divider)? I seem unable to make out *what I see*, or at least some significant parts of what I see and their relations to each other.<sup>44</sup>

The view on the phenomenal character of perceptual noise, to which this exemplification points, is a *sensory misfire* (SM) view. On this view, to undergo perceptual noise is not a breakdown of *veridical* perception, but rather a more elementary misfire of perception per se. By the SM view's lights, one would take oneself to be experiencing noise when one aims to but cannot perceive, or more subtly, when one means to perceive and grasps that such perception seems partly successful, and partly interfered with.<sup>45</sup> It may be noted here that SM, no less than EM, defers vexing issues concerning the status of perceptual noise as some content of experience (conceptual, representational, relational, or primitive) or rather as some modification of such content.<sup>46</sup> Still, SM cannot forfeit all detail regarding what undergoing perceptual noise involves, what it is like for one's perception to be completely or partly inhibited on account of some noise. There are some different options for articulating an SM view. Some theorists may be tempted to advert to some version of either a sense data or a *quale* theory: roughly, that to undergo perceptual noise is to confront the raw and inchoate sensate barrage to which the human perceptual apparatuses are exposed. However, one might also adopt a flexible, less controversial version of the SM view; namely, instead of committing to the thesis

<sup>44</sup>This example may raise a question as to whether it constitutes a case of perceptual noise. I think that the case of the mist driver is sufficiently analogous to Hellie's example of an individual unable to distinguish two colour fields due to the fluctuation and uncertainty of their vision; inasmuch as that example qualifies as a case involving phenomenal perceptual noise, the mist driver would as well.

<sup>45</sup>In neuroscientific literature, this view of noise is often discussed as in terms of 'noise that is intrinsic to the perceptual system' (Aston et al. 2023), though there is debate about whether or not such noise can or must be a constituent of perceptual experience.

<sup>46</sup>I.e. the 'nettlesome questions' mentioned in note 15 above.

that perception involves sense data (and thus that the inhibition of perception reveals such sense data for what it is, whatever that is), one can simply take the phenomenal character of perceptual noise as being what it is like for the ‘transparency’ of perception to be undermined. One useful instance of this view can be found in Gert’s discussion (2021) of visual noise in terms of the phenomena of ‘*eigengrau*’ and ‘*eigenlicht*,’ that is, the manifesting of ‘visual snow’ or ‘idioretinal light’ in one’s visual field, influentially explored in Helmholtz (1962 (1856)) and Fechner (1966).<sup>47</sup> In turning to Gert’s account, we can explore what an SM view entails, before considering some concerns about it.<sup>48</sup>

To make sense of Gert’s SM view, a brief clarification is in order, regarding the claim that perception is ‘transparent’ (i.e. the thesis of the transparency of perception). Its general thrust is that perception either does not include or does not require any ‘mental properties’ (Paul 2014), or other non-worldly or non-empirical phenomenal properties, inasmuch as it is a seemingly ‘direct’ sensuous experience of worldly entities, events, or situations and their features; that is, the only phenomenal properties given via perception are the phenomenal properties of the world and its constituents.<sup>49</sup> There are different ways to support such a thesis, yet many philosophers have claimed that it is a primitive intuitive datum about perception:

<sup>47</sup>Cf. also Schwitzgebel (2014), 139 ff. for discussion of these phenomena. Though they are not the same, these visual phenomena may be taken as analogous to what Block discusses as ‘phosphene-experiences’ in (1996). To generate the latter type of experience, he writes: ‘Close your eyes and place the heels over your eyes. Push your eyeballs lightly for about a minute’ (35).

<sup>48</sup>Other takes on perceptual noise as an impeding of transparency are available. One instance of this view seems to be at stake in Lévinas’s brief discussion of sensation and hearing in (2009), from which Benoist draws inspiration in (2013). Still another can be extrapolated from Casati and Dokic (1994). Though not specifically concerned with noise but rather with the transparent ‘medium’ (*milieu*) of perception, they postulate and give some examples for how that ‘*milieu*’ may itself be perceived, which may lead one to observe changes and features in what one perceives that may not be attributed to the object of one’s perception (1994, 62 ff.). Such a version of SM raises some interesting questions for how to understand *environmental* perceptual noise; for instance, what seems crucial about their view is that the impeding of transparency wouldn’t entail that the phenomenal character of perceptual noise involves a *self-directed* experience, that is, where in such an experience of perceptual noise, as of ‘Marie’s noisy voice,’ one would *not* be looking at oneself trying to perceive, but rather one would become aware of the perceptual ‘*milieu*’ as impeding one’s perception. Here, it would take up too much space to address both their and Gert’s accounts.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. Chalmers (2006, 64): ‘the phenomenology of perception usually seems to present the world directly, not in virtue of representation of any experiential intermediaries.’

it is taken as just being the way perception is, if and when ones attends to it. However, even if one takes the transparency of perception to be true (no small controversy), its implications leave theorists in disagreement.<sup>50</sup> Just to mention an ambiguity relevant to our discussion, one question is whether this ‘primitive intuitive datum’ about perception entails that perceiving subjects are debarred from introspecting (or ‘attending to’) some non-worldly features of their experience, or rather that such subjects typically tend to avoid (or fare badly at) paying much mind to them.<sup>51</sup>

With this ground-clearing out of the way, how does the thesis of transparency relate to a view of the phenomenal character of perceptual noise? Once more, Gert’s SM view amounts to the claim that to experience perceptual noise is to experience the transparency of perception to be impeded. That impeding and the concomitant shift from a transparent to a non-transparent type of experience clarifies what it is like to undergo perceptual noise. However, the premise that there could be an impeding of transparency, which is paradigmatic of experiences of perceptual noise, in turn rests on two underlying ideas. First, that in experiences of perceptual noise *something other* than the properties of worldly or empirical entities, situations, or events is disclosed or experienced. Let’s call this an ‘other phenomenal property’ claim. And second, that in experiences of perceptual noise a discrepancy in one’s perceiving has been detected; awareness of this discrepancy defines the span, so to speak, of the noisy perceptual episode. Let’s call this a ‘discrepancy’ claim. Both of these invite further comment, in order to see the plausibility and scope of the SM view.

First, regarding the ‘other phenomenal property’ claim (OPP), there is a natural question here: if the idea is that ‘something other’ is being experienced in episodes of perceptual noise, one might well wonder what that is. We already have a clue for this. If what is shown is not a property of one or some empirical entities, one might infer that what is thus shown is a

<sup>50</sup>Cf., for example, Remez and Trout (2009) for such concerns regarding the philosophical and psychological implications of transparency. In contemporary philosophy of perception, the transparency of perception is debated with regard to all different sorts of implications: to name but a few, whether perception is representational, whether it is intentional, and whether perception can be introspected upon or be said to have any phenomenal character at all. Cf. Paul (2014) for an overview of these debates.

<sup>51</sup>This concern has been raised by Kind (2003) in terms of whether ‘strong or weak transparency’ characterises perception; a similar concern can be found in Gendler and Hawthorne (2006, 2).

phenomenal property of oneself, and more specifically, of one's 'perceiving': one's visual system or visual awareness, for instance. Or one could say, as some might, that what one experiences are 'non-presentational' phenomenal properties. However, that issue can be deferred; clarifying what these 'other' phenomenal properties are, while being an important task downstream for any SM view, is not the first thing that needs to be established.<sup>52</sup> That is, for SM to elaborate a view of perceptual noise, it is not necessary—initially, at least—to tether its description to some specific phenomenal properties. Inasmuch as it can be pointed out what such an experience *does not involve*—inasmuch as one can point to the manner in which perceptual noise is *not taken* in its appearance—SM seems already able to open up a viable space for understanding perceptual noise phenomenologically. This nuance is nicely exemplified by Gert's discussion of cases in which individuals pick up upon the 'graininess' of their visual field ('*eigenlicht*'). His primary concern is to establish that in episodes in which one notes the presence of *eigenlicht*—in low light situations, for instance—what chiefly characterises such episodes is that one is taking oneself *not to be perceiving* the world. Gert pushes this so far as to claim that in such episodes one is not even perceiving in some distorted (i.e. blurred) manner (2021, 6619 f.). Rather, one apprehends that something else (non-worldly) is being presented in one's perceptual episode. Thus, it does not matter much to Gert what the proper descriptors of such 'graininess' are (is it like 'dust-like' in one's vision or not?), and also does not much matter what *eigenlicht* may in fact demonstrate regarding the metaphysics of perception (what its grounds are, i.e. which metaphysical theory of perception this datum best supports).<sup>53</sup>

The second claim on which the idea of the impeding of transparency in a perception rests—'discrepancy'—touches upon a complex and tricky issue, which stems from an ambiguity within the OPP claim. The postulate that there are 'other phenomenal properties' included within one's experience can have different implications, not all of which are equally

<sup>52</sup>This is why it constitutes a flexible approach to perceptual noise.

<sup>53</sup>Cf. Schellenberg (2018, 145 ff.) for a critique of 'phenomenal properties' as being 'peculiar entities' for which a theory of perception has no need. In making this argument—that *eigenlicht* is experienced as a feature of one's perception which cannot be identified with any feature of some empirical entity that one perceives—Gert offers a counter to that view. For *eigenlicht* would motivate the category of 'phenomenal properties,' and also the distinction between different types of phenomenal properties, by being at least one case of some property experienced that is not a 'represented content' within that experience.

problematic for the transparency of perception. It can simply mean that some phenomenal properties constituting an experience are unlike certain others; this is less of a problem for the transparency of perception, because dissimilarity or difference does not entail clash or conflict in phenomenal properties (nor the impeding of perception). For instance, if one thinks that every perception involves some (minimal) kind of self-awareness, the latter would be an example of an ‘other phenomenal property.’ But one could still hold that there would be two different yet compatible types of phenomenal properties comprising one’s experience, that is, where the one would not get in the way of the other.<sup>54</sup> Second, the OPP claim can mean that there can be phenomenal properties of the one type that comprise an experience *without* the phenomenal properties of the other type. This is Block’s point about orgasms, pains, after-images, and phosphene-experiences (1996, 31 ff.); in them, one experiences something lacking in ‘representational contents,’ and so, if those examples also count as perceptual experiences, they are non-transparent ones.<sup>55</sup> This is a bigger problem for a strong thesis of the transparency of perception—that *all* perception is transparent and that there are *no* OPP—but does not yet mean that there could ever be something like the *experience* of the impeding of the transparency of perception; it would just mean that perceptual experience has different ways of being accomplished (e.g. transparent, non-transparent). Third, the OPP postulate can be taken to mean that phenomenal properties of the one type disagree or clash with those of the other type; that is, the one can be given only in hindering or preventing the other from being given. This last idea is that of the *discrepancy* between some phenomenal properties and others in one’s experience, and is required to explain how there could be an impeding of transparency on account of some perceptual noise.

Thus, the idea of a ‘discrepancy’ is necessary in order for the SM view to generate an account of perceptual noise because there being ‘other’ phenomenal properties does not entail *experienced* interference with the transparency of perception. The reason for this is that those ‘other’ phenomenal properties cannot simply be assumed to interact problematically with the phenomenal properties of (perceived) empirical entities. Indeed,

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Dewalque (2022) for a ‘compatibilist’ account of transparency along these lines.

<sup>55</sup> Before Block, both Max Scheler and Michel Henry made a similar point regarding the non-representational character of some ‘affective experiences’ such as certain pains and pleasures.

the one and the other type of phenomenal property may be compatible with each other. For instance, as Gert claims, even while the ‘visual noise [of *eigenlicht*, B. V.] can be typically noticed in virtually the whole of one’s visual field (...) it is natural to ignore the noise and graininess of our experience. *That is, it is natural to see through it*’ (2021, 6617–18, emphasis added).<sup>56</sup> If the phenomenon of tinnitus (a persistent ringing in one’s ears) is taken as an auditory analogue for *eigenlicht*, a similar claim can be advanced; if it is sometimes distracting, it is not always so, because it needn’t get in the way of one’s hearing the world. Hence, tinnitus or *eigenlicht* have to involve some discrepancy between the available phenomenal properties, for the transparency of perception to be impeded; what is required is not only that there are such ‘other’ phenomenal properties but also that they either *shouldn’t or wouldn’t* normally be part of one’s grasp of empirical phenomenal properties, or *couldn’t* be a part of one’s grasp of such. Thus, transparency has broken down, and noise is being experienced, when one is aware of phenomenal properties that evince a mismatch or misaligning with those manifest in (nominally transparent) perception. This discrepancy would ground one’s sense that one is undergoing a perception which is being deterred or disrupted.

How should such discrepancy and its evincing be conceived, if this is a crucial component of those experiences in which transparency is impeded? A natural move would be to think of this in terms of conflict, that is, *incompatible* or clashing phenomenal properties (of ‘one’s own’ perceiving, on the one hand, and of the empirical entities perceived, on the other).<sup>57</sup> Yet such discrepancy between the one and the other set of properties needn’t only involve conflict or incompatibility; it can also involve discontinuity or ambiguous lack of coherence.<sup>58</sup> Gert for his part walks a fine line on this issue; he stays away from claiming that the ‘other’

<sup>56</sup>There is however some question as to how to understand what is ‘typical’ to perception and what is ‘natural’ to it in this part of Gert’s account. Hellie makes a similar point about ‘seeing through’ the “flickering and crepitation” in colour perception, and Morrison does not seem to be far away on this point (2012).

<sup>57</sup>For example, a Husserlian approach to such questions—how such diverse phenomenal properties can be a part of one’s experience, and how they can align or not—would lean into this idea of ‘conflict.’

<sup>58</sup>In other words, two sets of phenomenal properties may be confusing in their relation or fit with one another, in such a way that in perceiving one has trouble grasping the visual ‘structure’ or segmentation of two sets of presented features. Cf. Handel (2006, 161 ff.) for some examples and discussion.

phenomenal properties pertaining to one's own perceiving are strictly incompatible with the properties of empirical entities being presented via perception.<sup>59</sup> Instead, he emphasises the incompatibility of *awareness of* or attention to the one kind of property or the other. On his account, attention to the 'noisiness' of one's perception '*detracts* from paying attention to the objects one sees *through* the noise' (2021, 6621). So Gert's discussion amounts to a quite a mild sense of the impeding of transparency, because he invokes quite a cautious version of the discrepancy claim; he is only willing to consider how different forms of *attention* to various, dissimilar phenomenal properties available for introspection get in the way of each other, and thus seem to be incompatible.<sup>60</sup> In this way, he demurs on whether perceptual noise is or can always be a part of one's perception, and likewise demurs on the question of *how* these other phenomenal properties sit alongside or fit (or not) with the 'characteristics' of things shown in perception.

Summing up, Gert's SM view constitutes a depiction of the phenomenal character of perceptual noise, by locating it in an impeding of transparency. Understanding the experience of perceptual noise in this way involves two further claims or conditions: that there are 'other phenomenal properties' and that one could or must experience a discrepancy, that is, an interfering of one's grasp of the properties of the one or the other type (phenomenal properties of empirical entities versus other phenomenal properties, such as those of one's visual system). Let us now consider this SM view in light of our desiderata: how well it fares as a picture of the phenomenal character of perceptual noise and how well it deals with variances in experiences of perceptual noise. If it accommodates phenomena of *eigenlicht*, does it generalise well to other kinds of perceptual noise, such as they are? Again, to be clear, such a question is not on the radar of

<sup>59</sup>This is perhaps why Gert claims that phenomena of *eigenlicht* are not a 'strict counterexample to transparency' (2021, 6618).

<sup>60</sup>Still, he cannot ignore the import of this difference with and shift from normal, transparent perception, which has to be both available and detected as such. Thus, he cannot avoid that the implication of the SM view that the phenomenal character of perceptual noise must include some cognisance of that shift, a minimal awareness of an important difference with normal perception. On the other hand, such a shift, and the detection thereof, does not entail that there is only perceptual noise when one notices such noise, that is, when there is a shift to counter-transparency. Gert is subtle on this point, in allowing for a constant role or involvement of perceptual noise in perception, which then ought to be distinguished, in his account, from attending to such noise.

philosophers, such as Gert, concerned with problems for the thesis of the transparency of perception. But that takes nothing away from its import, and it may still catch Gert, if not others, by the tail; is the impeding of transparency the reason why Gert refers to *eigenlicht* as ‘visual noise’? More broadly, is this SM view how the phenomenal character of perceptual noise ought reliably to be understood in a wide variety of circumstances, namely, as a breakdown of transparency?

This SM view does have a certain appeal. Beyond its expedience for arguing that transparency is not an inviolable condition of human experience—perceptual or otherwise—it has some interest in terms of a phenomenological understanding of perceptual noise. Namely, it seems able to accommodate the distinction drawn earlier between the salience and the obtrusiveness of noise, that is, concerning how perceptual noise may be salient or clearly distinguishable in one’s experiences without occluding what is presented in them. This appeal of SM follows from how, on a nuanced version such as Gert’s, the ‘discrepancy’ in one’s perceptual experience can come about in different ways, where the ‘other phenomenal properties’ *can* but *need not* prevent the normal workings of perception; it may just be that awareness of the former is not something that one typically pays attention to, and that such attention takes some effort, at the cost of attention to things like sinks or stairs seen in the dark.<sup>61</sup> Second, the SM view does not seem to be completely flummoxed by at least some of the examples discussed earlier, such as the mist driver. Regarding that example, the SM view implies that as one tries to make sense of the mist and the road, and to figure out what it is that one is seeing, one experiences one’s own seeing (‘other phenomenal properties’) and has difficulty to see beyond those properties (‘discrepancy’). One’s *own* troubled seeing of the mist and the road, instead of giving access to or providing a window onto the world, gets in the way of such.

Still, a wide array of intuitive examples of perceptual noise sit rather uncomfortably within this SM view. This motivates one concern about its adequacy. With regard to the example of the chef in the freezer recognising the (salient) noise of the restaurant, it might be reasonable to say that they have to listen hard to pick out that noise; thus, such effort constitutes

<sup>61</sup>This point—that attention to ‘non-transparent’ phenomenal properties included in one’s experience may take some effort or skill—has been made by Kind (2003) and Hellie (2005), among others.

some discrepancy with ‘normal perception.’<sup>62</sup> Yet it seems implausible to claim that what they would be attending to are ‘other phenomenal properties’ (i.e. ‘mental properties,’ non-presentational properties, properties of their own perceptual system); that is, attending to a misfiring of (their) perception, which calls attention to itself (as with *eigenlicht*). Similar misgivings could be raised about the noise of shadows, the noise of the gale, or the tactile noise one feels when driving a car; if these are taken as experiences of perceptual noise, they are not solely about a self-experiencing or an experiencing of the misfiring of one’s perceptual system. Thus, their phenomenal character should also reflect how, when undergoing such perceptual noise one takes oneself to be experiencing *the world*, and not simply oneself (one’s body, one’s visual malfunctions), in a certain manner. The example of deterred perception is also indicative here; if one cannot make out whether one is seeing a bear or a bush, this contested nature of one’s perception may *also* be able to come about due to the environmental circumstances of one’s seeing, and may be perceived as such; it seems implausible that one could strictly attribute one’s deterred, noisy perception to a sensing of the limitations of one’s own visual capacities.

Thinking about noise music and other forms of art incorporating noise adds more weight to such misgivings. With regard to such works, it seems unlikely that their experiences involves an attending to phenomenal properties both *other* than and incompatible with the presented features (the empirical, phenomenal properties) of the ‘noisy’ work of art. Arguably, to experience the noise of a certain piece of music or work of art, one must attend to the presented features (or phenomenal properties) of that object; it seems artificial to think that noise such as one encounters through them could simply be described as a turning into oneself or a turning away from the world. It may well be that in encountering the noise within such works, one takes note of something going on with one’s perception, which may be *one way* of having ‘an awareness of discrepancy.’ Yet in function of something like noise music, such an ‘awareness of discrepancy’ perhaps ought not solely be conceived as a breakdown of, or a detracting

<sup>62</sup> Regarding this example, there is disagreement about whether the notion of transparency applies to acoustic perception, at least in the way that some take it to characterise visual perception. Adorno (1976) and, more recently, O’Callaghan (2007) have opposed the transparency of acoustic perception. Cf. Steintrager (2019) for critical discussion; for a conciliatory view, cf. Kulvicki (2008).

from, one's awareness of the features (or phenomenal properties) of the entity to which one's experience is ostensibly directed.

Here, as with the previous view considered (the EM view), it may be risky to rely on intuitive examples in order to formulate criticisms, due to possible disagreement as to what constitutes a robust case of perceptual noise. But they may be seen nonetheless to motivate a more general hesitation about the SM view, particularly regarding the idea of discrepancy on which it has been seen to rely. The discrepancy claim is, once more, the idea that it is not enough for two phenomenal properties to be dissimilar, in order for there to be an impeding of perception and its transparency. On top of that, there also has to be some salient interference or misalignment between the phenomenal properties that are given as one seeks to perceive, which prevents or make difficult the one sort of property from being seamlessly or unremarkably accessed through or alongside the other. This idea behind a discrepancy in one's perceiving seems crucial for coming to grips with perceptual noise; indeed, when phenomena like *eigenlicht* are framed as perceptual noise, it seems like the discrepancy claim is the lynchpin for clarifying what is salient about such visual noise. However, it is precisely in this respect that there can be some doubts about the SM view (specifically, on the transparency version I have presented). One can wonder, namely, whether such discrepancies between phenomenal properties are only evinced as an impeding of transparency, which is to say, when one has an awareness *not* directed toward the world and its features. The idea here would be that such discrepancy may not only arise when there has been a *misfiring* of perception. That is, discrepancy need not only be the product of a fundamental failure to perceive the world and its constituents *per se*, and of the self- or inward-turning experience that accompanies such misfiring. Instead, it might also be evinced when one manages to perceive the world quite well, which is to say, in attending closely to what features are presented of that world, not only in their distinctness but also in their interference with each other. In other words, the notion here is that there may be an 'awareness of discrepancy' *not only* when 'other' phenomenal properties, such as that exemplified by *eigenlicht*, interfere with access to empirical phenomenal properties. There may also be such discrepancy when empirical phenomenal properties interfere with each other. To pick out just a couple of examples, this seems interesting as a picture of what is going on when I pick up on the 'noisy' shadows of the trees on my windshield, and also the noise of the acoustic work of art.

Hence, on the one hand, like the EM view, the SM view is not entirely off the mark; misfirings of perceptual systems do furnish compelling instances of perceptual noise and furnish important considerations for understanding the phenomenal character of such experiences. On the other hand, it may also be reductive to take such misfirings as paradigmatic for that phenomenal character, as an SM view would encourage. Ultimately, it seems like the idea of ‘discrepancy’ identified in the course of discussing the SM view does much of the work in clarifying why such certain perceptual experiences, like *eigengrau*, are noise-like. Understanding better what such discrepancy involves and how it might come about in perceptual experience points the way forward for how the phenomenal character of perceptual noise ought to be understood; it shows something about how to pursue our second desideratum for a phenomenology of noise.

### 3.3 *Perceptual Disjoint*

Let’s take stock. I have shown that perceptual noise can be instantiated in how certain perceptual situations do not allow one to know or make sense of what one is perceiving, as with deterred perceptions, and also in how sometimes perceptions can be accompanied by other phenomenal properties, such as the luminous, ever-changing graininess of one’s visual field, which can impede the presentation of empirical properties of worldly entities, or at least impede attention to them. At the same time, I have maintained that while such cases should certainly inform how the phenomenal character of perceptual noise is understood, neither can be taken as offering a definitive picture of it. With respect to the views of perceptual noise such cases motivate (the EM and SM views respectively), there are important considerations which seem beyond the remit of each—the nature of the contesting or deterring of perception, the nature of the discrepancy in perceptual experience of which one becomes aware—when the phenomenal character of perceptual noise would be reduced to the one or the other.

Is all this just more grist for the skeptic’s mill? Should one think that perceptual noise has no distinct phenomenal character, and that to speak of it is little more than some *façon de parler*? Not necessarily. There is another view on perceptual noise that merits attention:

*Perceptual disjoint* (PD): in undergoing perceptual noise, one is inhibited from perceiving the world in a stable, unified manner, and the inhibition of stable, unified perception is distinctive for what it is like to experience perceptual noise

For now, I will only outline this PD view as a hypothesis about the phenomenal character of perceptual noise. First, to exemplify it, let us once more consider the (visual) noise of shadows. Chirimuuta provides a useful example of why shadows can seem like noise in her discussion of how colours help one come to grips with what one sees, for instance in looking at a forest floor. She writes that ‘because of the presence of shadows and the way that objects overlap and occlude each other in cluttered scenes,’ that is, because of “‘luminance noise’ due to a multiplicity of shadows,’ a perceiver may not be able to ‘[extract] edges from the visual scene and so divid[e] the image into distinct regions,’ such as would pertain to distinct objects that make up the visual field (2015, 91, 72). Colour vision, according to Chirimuuta’s pragmatist theory, can help cope with such noise; the human eye searches for alignments between ‘achromatic luminance edges’ and ‘chromatic edges’—contours of light and dark and contours of colour—in order to differentiate what is seen, between edges and shapes that pertain to objects as opposed to deceptive ‘shadow borders’ that may dissimulate edges and shapes. Yet the search for such alignments and the ‘the disambiguation of shadows is a significant problem that the visual system must overcome,’ as she stresses (2015, 93–94); the challenge of such ‘luminance noise’ is not always overwon.<sup>63</sup>

What qualifies such an experience of shadows as one of perceptual noise? Again, one might reach for the ideas that the shadows either keep our putative perceivers from knowing what they are seeing when they are looking at the forest floor or keep them from perceiving anything at all, but I take Chirimuuta’s example to point to something else, something more basic, going on. It is not that the perceiver does not perceive, but rather that what they perceive lacks unity; the different phenomenal properties that one is picking up upon as one looks at the forest floor cannot easily be pieced or fit together. Such features as colour shapes here and luminescent edges there do not form stable, coherent wholes, due to

<sup>63</sup>Cf. Casati and Cavanagh (2019, 102–104) for examples of how ‘shadow parts’ (perceived shadow features) may misalign amongst themselves and also evince mismatch with the ‘object parts’ of which they are shadows. On their analysis, such misalignments deter grasping the object and its shadow as a whole. My thanks to Fabio Tommy Pellizzer for drawing my attention to their analysis.

which one's grasp of the scene of the forest floor is also strained or challenged. This reflects an important difference with the SM view, because in this case one is perceiving, rather than not perceiving. My perception need not 'misfire' in order for me to be confused by the forest floor; the disorganised or unstable character of my perception can have to do with the testing dynamics of the environment. It seems to be a stretch to say my perception would be misfiring in this case, as it would be to say that one's old jalopy is misfiring because it did not win the F1 race. Even though I have trouble making out what is there on the forest floor (or driving in the mist) my perception is still grasping features of the world (chromatic and achromatic edges); my perceptual episode has not degenerated into some stream of 'raw sensation.'

A similar description might be given of the noise of the pub and the noise that the artist incorporates in their music or their audio/visual installation. Concerning the pub, one might say that because the *sounds* of the voices in the pub are, qua multitude of phenomenal properties, at least partially 'masking' or occluding each other as well as other sounds in the pub (Gibson 1966, 293–94), there are discrepancies both within and between my perceivings of these sounds. I can't string together what each voice might be saying—even despite detecting fragments here and there—and I may also be unable to track one or some voices as opposed to others. While I am presented with some phenomenal features of the voices—I may pick out part of a word here or there, or some aspect of intonation—I can't coherently perceive any of them, nor the whole of which they would putatively be part. The jackhammer, by contrast, offers a different way for thinking about perceptual noise in terms of the unity of experience; in its case, I might say that it is a stimulus so large or great that, for the perceiver, it becomes to challenge to situate it and thereby stably perceive it with respect to other features of one's environment. Thus, it too may count as a case of perceptual noise, under the assumption that there are not only different degrees but also different manners in which the coherence of perception may be impeded, challenged or threatened.

The premise operative in such descriptions is that to perceive is to perceive with some greater or lesser unity in terms of, at least, what and how one perceives. This has been a topic of debate in classic theories of experience and also in more recent discussions of, for instance, 'the unity of consciousness.' Three issues crucial to theories of the unity of (perceptual) experience would have to be properly aired out, if the latter were to be taken as a jumping off point for clarifying the phenomenal character of

perceptual noise. The first concerns whether there is anything like a unity of perception (or of experience) in the first place: i.e. whether ‘unity’ or ‘unification’ is always, sometimes, or never an aspect of perception, and also whether it always, sometimes, or never *needs* to be an aspect of perception. One might have doubts here; if, on a certain realist understanding of perception, all one takes perception to involve are distinct, mind-independent objects and their properties, and if one takes such objects, qua their identities, to ground the unity of those properties, the unity of experience may seem like a non-issue.<sup>64</sup> However, there are ways to complicate that picture, which motivate an interest in the unity of perceptual experience. One might take perception to involve not only objects but also situations and states of affairs, and landscapes and environments, the unity of which is dependent—in at least some cases, and at least partially—on the unity of their experience; this can be understood in terms of the likely difference between my perceptual landscape, and the hawk’s and the wolf’s. Moreover, one might insist that perception is closely connected to action; for instance, one does ‘merely’ perceive the world, but perceives it in function of certain evaluative interests, drives, and habituations—for instance, out of concern for risk and danger—which shape action and perhaps already are a form of action. Such interested or oriented perception would require unity, a thematic focus, so to speak. Yet it seems highly contestable to hold that the world and its constituents guarantees or constitutes such unity, even if it is true that it has some role in grounding that unity.<sup>65</sup> These considerations are useful for understanding perceptual noise because they would bring into relief, if only faintly, the domain of entities worth investigating for better understanding encounters with perceptual noise.

A second issue is whether the unity of perception is a part of phenomenal character, and how. Is the unity of perception something that is experienced? For, if so, that would also mean that something like ‘disunity’ (Bayne 2010) in an experience like perception may also be experienced. It certainly seems so, at least if one is open to the idea that perceptions, among other experiences, can be disrupted, distorted, interrupted, or

<sup>64</sup> Sartre for one argues for such a view in (1960, 38).

<sup>65</sup> A supporting consideration here is that certain objects of perception—visual objects like the Cornsweet illusion, acoustic objects like noise music—can have incompatible or conflicting properties, where an obtaining *phenomenal* unity of experience of such objects is not easily explained by any supposed metaphysical (‘real’) unity of the object perceived.

interfered with in different ways. The fact that persons can undergo things like car accidents or terrorist attacks and struggle to make sense of them, despite having been conscious throughout them, seems to indicate that there are such disturbances and disruptions of experience, which are experienced as such. Yet if that is right, it seems arbitrary to think that only such extreme or violent events may count as ‘disunities’ that affects the phenomenal character of one’s experience. On this assumption, a question that opens up is how such ‘disunities’ scale in different ways, up but also *down* for instance, in terms of their severity, quality, and their effects in one’s experience. There may be many lesser forms of disturbances of the unity of experience that someone may undergo; this is interesting, because from within the PD view, one is in a position to explore how there may be diverse encounters with ‘salient’ perceptual noise, not all of which have the same severity or effects as a ‘disturbance’ of the unity of experience. In other words, the ‘discrepancies’ encountered in perceptual experience, between phenomenal properties, may be both great and small, and in this way generate experiences of salient perceptual noise of different intensities.

The third issue concerns the very nature of the unities to which I have been referring, and the varieties of ‘disjoint’ and discrepancy—conflict *and* incompatibility—to which they may be susceptible. What kind or kinds of unity are there? It seems like there may be many, even if consideration is limited to the unity of perceptual experience. Such unity may be diachronic—the *Gestalt* of different notes heard that comprise a melody—but can also be a synchronic matter, as when one might look at blots or dots in the attempt to discern a pattern or shape or the nature of a surface; this difference is what Ehrenfels described as the distinction between ‘temporal’ versus ‘non-temporal’ Gestalt qualities (1988, 94). There is also reason to think that there may be both mono-sensorial (the visual vs the acoustic) and multi-sensorial (e.g. the visual *and* the acoustic) unities and disunities at stake in perceptual experience. The latter may be taken to be exemplified by noise art where image and sound are made to be out of sync with each other (Martin 2007). Lastly, one might distinguish between unities of experience (the unity of my inner life or ‘inner perception,’ von Ehrenfels 1988, 100; ‘subsumed’ experience, Bayne 2010) and unities of the entities targeted by my perception; there may be disturbances or disunities of both, but also disunity of the one without disunity of the other. All these are considerations that open a crucial dimension for understanding perceptual noise, as a type of experience that may have constituent factors both within and outside the experiencing individual, yet where

there is something constant or in common—‘disunity’—between or across both such sets of factors.

What finally is the appeal of the PD view, in terms of satisfying the second desideratum of a phenomenological account of noise? How might it fare better than the EM or SM views? Let me sketch where I think it can lead. The PD view offers in the first place a picture of the phenomenal character of perceptual noise that is able to accommodate a wide range of cases of perceptual noise, and particularly, slots well into understanding what one experiences in both deterred perceptions and in experiences in which it seems that the transparency of perception is impeded. Yet the PD view ought not be seen merely as an alternative to the EM and SM views. As I have attempted to indicate, the EM and SM views are not wrong outright; sometimes noise does indeed seem to have something to do with how we know the world or not; sometimes noise does seem connected with an inability to perceive as such. Thus, the EM and SM views might have something right about them but they are not precise enough, and the upshot would be that the PD perspective might allow for a more comprehensive view, not only to understand what is noise-like about the experiences discussed with respect to the EM and SM views but also to accommodate other experiences of noise. Second, it might offer some headway for understanding the evaluative variance of perceptual noise, which seems lacking in both EM and SM. One might hypothesise that in some cases PD can be valued in the phenomenal detachment from the environment or situation that it instantiates for the perceiver, to some greater or lesser extent, or valued for the ‘rapture’ of undergoing a disunity of one’s own ‘inner perception.’ At the same time, one might think there could be instances where such disunities seem disorienting, confusing, or alarming, and thus disvaluable. Third, the PD view is appealing in terms of understanding how certain forms of perceptual noise may be distinguishable from others by perceiving subjects. The noise of the jackhammer is both noise and yet is a kind of noise that is not like the noise of the pub. The PD view would account for this in terms of how there are many types of ‘disunities’ of perceptual experience, not all of which come about in the same ways: not all by a conflict or clashing of phenomenal properties, for instance, but rather via an incoherence or manifest ambiguity of their relation to each other.

Much more remains to be clarified regarding the PD view, and it may also face criticism from different quarters. To mention one: if the PD view comes down to the idea that perceptual noise is experienced as a

disturbance or impedance of the unity of perceptual experience, does it not make perceptual noise into a subjectivistic or even idealistic phenomenon—an experience of something that has no place in the world? While compelling enough, such concerns would not be fatal for the PD view. If it seems to make the experience of noise seem quite subjectivistic, as depending, for instance, on the intentional aims of the perceiving individual, it need not be understood this way. For instance, it can be argued—with a wink to enactivist perspectives—that such unity or coherence of perceptual experience as might become disjointed in perceptual noise is as much about an actor coordinating with respect to some actor-independent gestalt within the surrounding milieu, as about any ‘subjective’ intentional aims. And in terms of the example of some noise incorporated within a piece of music, one might even think about how different gestalts, perceptual versus evaluative, are brought into conflict with each other: for example, where what is not experienced as noise within one domain of experience—for example, an aesthetic one—might well seem like a type of noise at the level of perception *simpliciter*.

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