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Social Significance and Communal Perceptual Content: From Philosophical Theories of Perception to Religious Identity

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Abstract

Philosophical theories of perception have traditionally focused on what perceptual experience represents, how objects are presented to perceivers, and what distinguishes perceptual content from the objects perceived. Less attention has been given to the social conditions under which objects, practices, historical events, and identities acquire significance within perceptual experience. This article develops the concept of communal perceptual content to describe a narrower form of socially structured perceptual content: patterns in the perceptual experiences of individuals that may become sufficiently similar across members of a community through socially transmitted practices, histories, perceptual learning, and culturally shared modes of discrimination. The article distinguishes this possibility from socially conditioned attention, belief, interpretation, and appraisal. Shared significance alone does not establish shared perceptual content. Drawing on philosophical debates concerning perceptual content, cognitive penetration, perceptual learning, theory-ladenness, and social perception, the article examines the conditions under which social factors may affect perceptual presentation itself rather than merely influencing post-perceptual cognition. Bayne's (Bayne, 2009) account of perceptual content is used to clarify the possibility that relatively high-level properties may form part of perceptual experience, while research on cognitive penetration and predictive perception suggests that top-down cognitive, contextual, affective, and social information can influence visual processing. At the same time, the debate remains contested because apparent perceptual effects may sometimes reflect changes in attention, judgment, memory, or response rather than changes in perceptual content itself. Recent experimental research strengthens the intermediate empirical link between social influence and perceptual processing. Duderstadt et al. (2024), using diffusion decision modelling, found that social influence could affect the accumulation of sensory information during percep-

tual decision-making, with stronger effects when information was attributed to an in-group than to an out-group. This evidence is important because it shows that social identity can be associated with perceptual bias rather than only with explicit judgment. It does not, however, establish that social influence necessarily changes phenomenal perceptual content. The article therefore treats such findings as evidence for the plausibility of an intermediate pathway between social influence and perceptual content rather than as proof of communal perceptual content itself. The article further draws on theories of collective and cultural memory to explain how historically transmitted meanings and identity frameworks are socially preserved and reproduced. Collective memory is treated as a socially structured background for shared patterns of significance and identity, rather than as a literal form of collective phenomenology or as perceptual content in itself. The historical experience of the Syrian Christians of Malabar is used as a historically grounded illustrative case. Portuguese ecclesiastical representations, indigenous traditions, collective memory, institutional conflict, religious practices, and resistance demonstrate how socially transmitted meanings can shape attention, interpretation, appraisal, and practical action. Meloottu (2023) further illuminate the importance of inherited traditions, Syriac ecclesiastical practices, historical consciousness, social hierarchy, and institutional organization in the formation and reproduction of Syrian Christian identity. The case does not, however, provide direct empirical evidence that communal perceptual content caused historical resistance. The article therefore proposes a layered account in which social significance can influence perceptual and interpretive processes while preserving distinctions among perception, memory, interpretation, appraisal, and collective action. Collective memory is also considered as a structural analogue of phenomenal character in a limited functional sense: both concern the manner in which a domain is given under an organized aspect, although phenomenal character belongs to individual conscious experience whereas collective memory structures the socially inherited intelligibility of a communal past.

Keywords

Perceptual Content, Communal Perceptual Content, Social Significance, Socially Structured Perception, Collective Memory, Cultural Memory, Discourse, Representation, Religious Identity, Recognition, Cognitive Penetration, Perceptual Learning, Social Perception, Perceptual Decision-Making

1. Introduction

Perception is ordinarily analyzed as a relation between a perceiving subject and the world. Philosophical theories of perception consequently ask what perceptual experience represents, how an object is presented, and what distinguishes the content of an experience from the object perceived. Jeff Speaks characterizes perceptual content, in broad terms, as the way perceptual experience represents the

world as being, thereby distinguishing perceptual content from the object of perception itself (Speaks, 2009). This distinction provides the starting point for a further question.

Human beings do not encounter the social world independently of language, history, institutions, practices, education, and inherited forms of meaning. Objects, persons, practices, and events can therefore acquire significance within socially organized environments. A religious symbol, for example, may be physically observable as an object while simultaneously functioning within a community as a sign of continuity, authority, ancestry, sacred history, or belonging.

The existence of such shared significance, however, does not by itself demonstrate that members of the community have identical perceptual experiences. Individuals can attend differently to the same object, interpret it differently, disagree about its significance, and act in opposing ways. This observation creates a central methodological requirement for the present argument: communal perceptual content must not be identified with everything that a community shares cognitively or culturally.

The article therefore distinguishes four related but different levels:

1) Perceptual content—what an experience represents the world as being;

2) Attention and salience—what the perceiver notices or preferentially attends to;

3) Belief, interpretation, and appraisal—what the perceiver thinks an object or event means and how it should be evaluated; and

4) Collective action—what individuals or groups subsequently do.

The central proposal is that social conditions can influence all four levels, but evidence for influence at one level should not automatically be treated as evidence for influence at another. In particular, a community may share a historical interpretation without possessing shared perceptual content in the stronger philosophical sense.

The article consequently develops communal perceptual content as a deliberately narrow concept. It refers to cases in which members of a community, through shared histories, practices, socialization, and forms of perceptual learning, acquire sufficiently similar ways of perceptually discriminating or having socially meaningful features presented in experience. The claim is therefore about social patterning within individual perceptual experiences, not about a collective mind or a single communal consciousness.

The historical experience of the Syrian Christians of Malabar provides a useful case for examining the social conditions surrounding this proposal. The case is particularly relevant because Portuguese ecclesiastical intervention, indigenous traditions, competing historical representations, religious practices, and collective memories became intertwined with questions of authority and identity. At the same time, the historical evidence is better suited to demonstrating socially transmitted meaning, memory, appraisal, and action than to establishing direct causal changes in phenomenal perceptual content. The case will therefore be treated as

historically grounded evidence for the social mechanisms surrounding communal apprehension, not as proof of a universal law of socially constituted perception.

The central question can therefore be formulated as follows:

Can socially transmitted meanings and practices contribute to the perceptual presentation or discrimination of an object or situation, or do their effects remain only at the levels of attention, belief, interpretation, and appraisal?

The argument developed here is deliberately modest. It does not claim that communities possess a single mind, a unified perceptual experience, or a collective perceptual subject. Nor does it claim that social meaning determines perceptual content in every case. Rather, it proposes that socially transmitted frameworks can shape the conditions under which individuals perceive, attend to, interpret, and evaluate objects within their shared social world, and that in some cases this social structuring may extend to aspects of perceptual presentation itself.

The concept of communal perceptual content is introduced to describe this narrower possibility. It does not mean that a community literally possesses a shared perceptual experience. Rather, it refers to perceptual contents that may be systematically patterned across members of a community because they participate in historically transmitted forms of perception, practice, and learning.

Its defining feature is therefore not simply agreement concerning the significance of an object. Its defining feature is that socially transmitted frameworks may contribute to how the object is perceptually presented or discriminated.

The article develops this argument through philosophical theories of perceptual content and through scholarship concerning cognitive penetration, perceptual learning, theory-ladenness, social perception, collective memory, discourse, recognition, and social meaning. The historical experience of the Syrian Christians of Malabar provides a case through which these distinctions can be explored.

2. Perceptual Content: Philosophical Background

The concept of perceptual content has been developed within several competing approaches to perception. A central question concerns what perceptual experience represents and how an object is presented to a perceiver. The distinction between the object of perception and the content through which it is represented is important because perception cannot be adequately characterized merely as a relation between a subject and a bare physical object (Speaks, 2009).

The philosophical importance of presentation can also be approached through Frege's distinction between sense and reference. Frege's analysis demonstrates that the cognitive significance of an expression cannot be reduced to its reference because the same referent may be presented under different senses (Frege, 1892/1980). This distinction is not itself a theory of perceptual content, but it provides a useful conceptual resource for distinguishing an object from the mode under which it is presented or apprehended.

Russell's analysis of denoting provides a related distinction between objects and the linguistic or propositional structures through which they are identified and

described (Russell, 1905). Like Frege's analysis, Russell's account is not a theory of communal perception.

Its relevance here is more limited: it reinforces the methodological importance of distinguishing an object from the conceptual or representational structures through which it is identified and described.

Contemporary philosophy of perception provides a more direct basis for the discussion. Speaks (2009) examines the nature of perceptual content and the relationship between perceptual experience and the content attributed to it. Bayne (2009), meanwhile, argues for a relatively expansive conception of phenomenal content, thereby raising the possibility that perceptual experience may represent properties that are not exhausted by narrowly sensory characteristics.

These approaches are relevant to the present argument because they make it possible to ask how the content and phenomenal character of perceptual experience should be individuated without assuming in advance that perceptual experience is restricted to elementary sensory features.

A further issue arises from the contemporary debate over cognitive penetration and the possibility that cognitive states may influence perceptual processing or experience. Research in this area considers whether expectations, predictions, prior knowledge, and other higher-level states can affect perceptual processing (O'Callaghan et al., 2016). Such proposals are important for the present argument because socially transmitted knowledge and practices could, in principle, constitute one source of higher-level influence on perception.

Nevertheless, a general claim about cognitive influence does not by itself establish a change in perceptual content. Firestone and Scholl (2016), for example, argue that many apparently top-down effects on perception can instead be explained through attention, memory, judgment, task demands, or other post-perceptual mechanisms.

The distinction is fundamental to the present article. A person may perceive the same object as another person while attending to different features, holding different beliefs about it, interpreting it differently, or assigning it different evaluative significance. Such differences are socially important, but they do not automatically constitute differences in perceptual content.

The present argument therefore adopts a deliberately restricted criterion:

Social influence on attention, belief, interpretation, or appraisal does not necessarily constitute social influence on perceptual content.

But where socially transmitted learning contributes to relatively stable differences in perceptual discrimination or perceptual presentation, it becomes possible to investigate whether such differences constitute patterned perceptual experience and, under appropriate conditions, communal perceptual content.

This criterion allows the article to recognize the possible social structuring of perception without collapsing perception into belief, interpretation, memory, or appraisal. It also avoids the opposite assumption that perceptual experience must be completely insulated from social learning and culturally transmitted practices.

The question is therefore not whether social meaning determines perception in general, but under what conditions socially transmitted forms of learning and practice may contribute to perceptual experience itself.

3. From Individual Perception to Socially Structured Apprehension

The movement from individual perception to communal perceptual content requires two distinctions. First, a community is not a single perceiving subject: members may share historical memories, religious narratives, symbols, categories of belonging, practices, and expectations while differing in their interpretations and evaluations. Shared cultural frameworks therefore do not imply identical perceptual or experiential states (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick, 1999; Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995).

Second, social influence can operate at several levels of apprehension. Communities transmit frameworks through language, ritual, institutions, education, historical narratives, religious practices, commemorations, and interpersonal communication. These structures can influence what individuals attend to and how they interpret, evaluate, and respond to what they encounter. Research on social perception likewise treats perception and social cognition as embedded in structured interpersonal contexts (Fiske, 1993).

Such influences should not, however, be treated automatically as changes in perceptual content. A difference in attention, belief, interpretation, or appraisal may alter how an already perceived object is understood without altering what the perceptual experience represents.

A religious practice illustrates the distinction. At the sensory level, a liturgical action consists of observable bodily movements, sounds, objects, and spatial arrangements. Within a particular community, the same perceptible features may be associated with continuity, sacred authority, ancestry, or communal identity. These associations can organize attention and shape interpretation and appraisal without by themselves establishing a difference in perceptual content.

The broader pathway can therefore be represented as:

Object or event → perceptual experience → attention/salience → interpretation → appraisal → action

This pathway captures a common form of social structuring. Socially transmitted meanings can influence which features of an already perceived object or event become salient, how they are interpreted, what significance is attributed to them, and what responses they elicit. The pathway therefore establishes social influence on apprehension without by itself establishing communal perceptual content.

A specifically perceptual claim requires an additional pathway:

Social practice and learning → perceptual learning/expertise → perceptual discrimination → patterned perceptual experience

Perceptual-learning research provides a basis for specifying this stronger pathway. Goldstone and Barsalou (1998) review evidence that perceptual similarity is not fixed but can be tuned through learning and repeated task experience. Their

discussion includes findings in which categorization training altered sensitivity to perceptual differences, supporting the possibility that sustained practice can contribute to relatively stable changes in perceptual discrimination.

Social influence and perceptual decision-making

Recent experimental work also provides an empirical bridge between social influence and perceptual processing. Duderstadt et al. (2024) used diffusion decision modelling to distinguish perceptual bias from judgmental bias in perceptual decision-making. They reported stronger perceptual bias when information was attributed to an in-group than to an out-group and interpreted the effect in terms of sensory-information accumulation.

The finding is relevant because it indicates that social identity can influence a component of perceptual processing rather than only explicit judgment. It does not, however, establish that social identity changes phenomenal perceptual content.

The appropriate distinction is therefore:

Social identity/social influence → perceptual processing

Rather than automatically:

Social identity/social influence → altered phenomenal perceptual content

Additional evidence would be required to establish the latter. In particular, evidence would need to distinguish changes in perceptual discrimination or presentation from changes attributable only to attention, judgment, memory, interpretation, or response selection.

The cognitive-penetration debate reinforces this methodological caution. O'Callaghan et al. (2016) review evidence that predictions and higher-level cognitive states may influence perceptual processing, while Firestone and Scholl (2016) argue that many apparent top-down effects can instead be explained by attention, memory, judgment, task demands, or related factors.

Taken together, these approaches support an intermediate position. Social identity and socially transmitted practices may influence perceptual processing and, under conditions of sustained learning and expertise, may contribute to stable perceptual discrimination. But evidence of social influence on processing is not by itself evidence of communal perceptual content.

This distinction supplies the criterion used in the next section: attention, belief, interpretation, memory, and appraisal remain analytically distinct from perceptual content, while socially organized learning becomes relevant to the stronger claim only when it can be connected to perceptual discrimination or perceptual presentation.

4. Social Significance and Perceptual Content

Social significance concerns the importance, value, or meaning that an object, practice, event, or identity acquires within a particular social context. Perceptual content, by contrast, concerns what perceptual experience represents the world as being (Speaks, 2009). The two concepts must therefore remain analytically dis-

tinct.

An object may have considerable social significance without that significance itself constituting part of its perceptual content. A religious symbol provides a useful example. At the physical level, it is an object possessing particular visual, material, and spatial properties. Within a religious community, however, the same object may signify religious continuity, ancestry, authority, sacrifice, or communal belonging. Such socially transmitted significance can influence what individuals attend to, remember, interpret, and evaluate (Fiske, 1993; Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995).

The relationship can therefore be represented as:

Socially transmitted significance → attention/salience → interpretation → appraisal

This pathway is not deterministic. Individuals may accept, reject, reinterpret, or contest inherited meanings, and different members of the same community may attach competing significance to the same object or practice. Shared cultural frameworks therefore establish possibilities and patterns of interpretation rather than guaranteeing uniform responses (Olick, 1999).

The stronger claim concerning perceptual content requires something additional:

Socially transmitted practice → repeated learning → perceptual discrimination → patterned perceptual experience

The significance of this additional pathway is that it identifies a specifically perceptual effect rather than merely a cognitive or evaluative one. Repeated socially organized practice may contribute to the acquisition of perceptual expertise or more refined capacities to discriminate features that were previously less readily distinguished.

The central criterion can therefore be stated more precisely: evidence for communal perceptual content requires evidence that socially organized learning or practice contributes to perceptual discrimination or perceptual presentation, rather than merely to attention, belief, interpretation, memory, or appraisal.

Communal perceptual content refers to cases in which members of a community, through shared histories, practices, socialization, and perceptual learning, acquire sufficiently similar patterns of perceptual discrimination or experience such that socially patterned features of perceptual presentation recur across members of the community.

The expression "sufficiently similar" does not require identical experiences, unanimous agreement, or a collective consciousness. The proposal concerns recurrent social patterning within individual perceptual capacities and experiences. The community remains constituted by individual perceivers rather than by a collective perceiving subject.

The resulting position is therefore intermediate between two extremes: it rejects the view that perception is wholly independent of social learning and cultural environment, while also rejecting the view that every shared meaning, belief, memory,

or interpretation should be classified as perceptual content.

5. Discourse, Representation, and Social Authority

The social mediation of meaning is closely connected with discourse, symbolic communication, and institutional practices. Thompson (1990) emphasizes the importance of symbolic forms, communication, institutions, and relations of power in the production, circulation, and organization of meaning.

Social meanings are therefore not transmitted solely through individual cognition; they are also sustained through communicative and institutional structures that shape how social reality is described and understood.

Representations can classify social actors and communities in consequential ways. A community may be represented as orthodox or heterodox, legitimate or illegitimate, indigenous or foreign, civilized or backward.

Such descriptions are not necessarily neutral when they become embedded in institutional practices and authoritative forms of communication. Once established within religious, political, educational, or historiographical institutions, representations can influence how subsequent actors understand the community and its practices (Said, 1978; Thompson, 1990).

The process can therefore be expressed as:

Social position → discourse → representation → institutional authority → social significance → interpretation

This sequence describes primarily a sociological and historiographical process, rather than a theory of perception.

Its importance for the present argument lies in explaining how particular descriptions and interpretations become socially available, authoritative, and durable. Through such processes, representations can provide the background categories within which objects, practices, events, and communities are subsequently understood.

Institutional authority can increase the durability and intergenerational transmission of particular representations. Official records, educational practices, ecclesiastical structures, historical writing, public commemorations, and other institutional practices can preserve, reproduce, or contest interpretations over time.

Collective memory scholarship similarly emphasizes that relationships to the past are socially organized and transmitted through institutional and cultural frameworks rather than existing solely as isolated individual recollections (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Olick, 1999).

The distinction between representation and perception must nevertheless be maintained. A powerful discourse does not automatically determine what individuals literally see. It can instead establish the categories, expectations, and interpretive frameworks through which what they perceive becomes socially intelligible.

The distinction can therefore be represented as:

Discourse → representation → social significance → interpretation/appraisal → action

Rather than:

Discourse → perceptual content

The latter would require additional evidence showing that socially transmitted discourse, through learning or practice, contributes specifically to perceptual discrimination or perceptual experience.

This qualification preserves the central criterion of the article: socially shared representation is not identical with communal perceptual content.

6. Representation, Power, and Problem of Authority

The preceding section showed how discourse and representation can become socially available and authoritative. The present section asks how relations of power shape that process and why such authority matters for communal identity and socially structured apprehension.

Edward Said's Orientalism provides an important account of the relationship between representation and power. Said (1978) argues that representations of the Orient were historically embedded within relations of knowledge and power rather than functioning simply as neutral descriptions. Thompson (1990) likewise emphasizes the role of institutions and communication in the production, circulation, and legitimation of symbolic forms.

The relevance of these approaches to the present argument is not the claim that power determines perceptual content. Rather, they explain how unequal institutional relations can affect which descriptions are produced, preserved, circulated, and treated as legitimate knowledge. Power is therefore situated upstream in the social organization of representation rather than being treated as a direct perceptual mechanism.

Negura et al. (2019) reinforce this point by examining social representations in relation to the organization of social relations and power. Their discussion, drawing on Jodelet's framework, distinguishes trans-subjective, inter-subjective, and subjective levels at which representations are embedded in cultural systems, communicated among people, and taken up by individuals.

The resulting pathway can be represented as:

Power → representation → institutional circulation → legitimacy/recognition → social significance → interpretation/appraisal

This is not a simple or deterministic causal sequence. Institutional authority can increase the durability of particular representations, but representations may also be contested, reinterpreted, selectively appropriated, or rejected by the people to whom they apply (Negura et al., 2019; Thompson, 1990).

At the trans-subjective level, representations are embedded in norms, values, ideologies, and institutional arrangements; at the inter-subjective level, they operate through communication and interaction; and at the subjective level, they may be internalized or transformed by individuals (Negura et al., 2019). These levels provide a useful bridge between social structure and individual apprehension without reducing one to the other.

A representation may consequently become incorporated into inherited historical knowledge while competing representations are marginalized within authoritative institutions. The politics of recognition is relevant here because the social standing granted to identities and forms of knowledge can be affected by whether they receive recognition or experience misrecognition (Taylor, 1994).

Such processes matter for communal identity because individuals can encounter their own community through externally produced classifications as well as through internally transmitted traditions. The two may coincide, but they may also diverge, creating conditions for disagreement over history, identity, legitimacy, and authority (Said, 1978; Taylor, 1994).

The relationship between external representation and communal self-understanding can therefore be represented as:

External representation ↔ institutional authority ↔ communal self-understanding

The bidirectional arrows are important because externally produced classifications need not flow into passive acceptance. Communities can respond through reinterpretation, resistance, selective appropriation, or the preservation of alternative historical narratives. Communal identity is therefore shaped through continuing interaction between inherited self-understandings and representations produced by others.

This also clarifies the role of power in the present account. Power can influence the social conditions under which representations acquire authority, but it does not follow that power directly determines what individuals perceptually experience. A representation may be institutionally dominant while remaining contested at the levels of belief, memory, interpretation, or identity.

The distinction is especially important for communal perceptual content. Social representations can organize the cultural and institutional environment in which objects, persons, and events become salient, intelligible, and socially significant, but representational authority is not itself perceptual content.

A possible perceptual consequence emerges only through a further mechanism. When authoritative representations are encountered repeatedly through education, ritual, communication, and other socially organized practices, they may contribute to expectations and habits of attention; sustained practice may also contribute to perceptual learning and discrimination (Goldstone, 1998). Whether such learning produces changes in perceptual content remains an empirical question rather than a consequence that follows from power or representation alone.

The integrated model is therefore:

Power and institutional conditions → discourse and representation → social significance/recognition → attention, interpretation, and appraisal → sustained practice and learning → possible perceptual discrimination

This formulation connects Sections 5 and 6 to the central distinction developed earlier: power explains part of the social conditions under which representations acquire authority; representation helps organize significance and apprehension;

and perceptual learning is the additional mechanism that would have to be demonstrated before a specifically perceptual form of communal patterning could be established.

The following discussion of collective and cultural memory develops the next part of this framework by examining how socially organized understandings of the past can persist, be transmitted, and contribute to the continuity or transformation of communal significance.

7. Collective and Cultural Memory

Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory provides an important connection between individual cognition and social structure. Halbwachs (1992) argues that recollection is socially framed: individuals remember within social frameworks that provide categories, relationships, and contexts through which the past becomes intelligible.

Memory, on this account, is not simply an isolated psychological process but is shaped by the social environments in which individuals participate. Collective memory may be sustained and transmitted through stories, rituals, texts, institutions, commemorations, religious practices, and repeated narratives of origin. These practices do not merely preserve information about the past; they can also maintain shared categories of significance through which members of a community understand people, events, places, and symbols.

Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) extend this perspective through the concept of cultural memory, emphasizing socially transmitted forms through which communities preserve significant knowledge and sustain cultural identity across generations. Cultural memory therefore provides a particularly useful way of understanding how historically accumulated meanings can remain available within a community even when individual members did not directly experience the events to which those meanings refer.

Paul Ricoeur (2004) further clarifies the relationship between memory, narrative, and identity. Narratives of the past do not merely preserve historical information; they can organize how communities understand continuity, responsibility, belonging, and difference.

Contemporary research on collective memory has nevertheless cautioned against treating it as a literal memory possessed by a unified group-mind. Olick (1999) distinguishes different ways in which remembering can be socially organized, while Olick et al. (2011) and Hirst and Manier (2008) emphasize the diversity of practices, institutions, representations, and processes through which collective remembering takes place.

For the present argument, collective and cultural memory should consequently be treated as a social-cultural background rather than as perceptual content itself. Its relevance to communal perceptual content depends on whether socially transmitted meanings become connected, through identifiable psychological and perceptual mechanisms, to differences in what individuals attend to, how they learn

to discriminate features, and ultimately what they perceptually experience.

The relationship can be represented as:

Collective/cultural memory

Socially transmitted narratives and practices

Attention/belief/interpretation/appraisal/perceptual learning

Perceptual sensitivity and discrimination

Possible communal perceptual content

The following model is theoretical rather than deterministic: collective and cultural memory provides social-cultural conditions in which attention, interpretation, appraisal, and perceptual learning may develop. Perceptual learning is especially relevant because it involves relatively lasting changes in perceptual sensitivity and discrimination (Goldstone, 1998). Accordingly, the proposed pathway is: collective/cultural memory and social practices → socially transmitted narratives and significance → attention, interpretation, appraisal, and perceptual learning → perceptual sensitivity/discrimination → possible communal perceptual content. Shared meanings and memories may be socially common without being perceptually common.

8. Identity, Recognition, and Social Significance

Charles Taylor's account of recognition and social imaginaries provides an important basis for understanding identity as socially constituted. Identity develops not only through individual self-understanding but also through relations in which individuals and communities receive recognition or experience misrecognition from others (Taylor, 1994, 2004).

Recognition and misrecognition therefore matter for how communities understand themselves within wider social and historical relations. This becomes especially important when a community's self-understanding differs from representations imposed or circulated by external authorities. Such divergence can affect how practices, institutions, historical memories, and symbols acquire social significance.

For the present argument, identity is relevant because it can organize the significance of what individuals encounter. An object or practice may remain physically unchanged while becoming more salient when it is understood as expressing communal continuity, belonging, authority, or a threatened tradition. Identity therefore provides a social framework within which attention, interpretation, and appraisal can become patterned without automatically becoming perceptual content.

Duderstadt et al. (2024) provide experimental evidence relevant to this relationship. Their study found that the social identity of an information source affected perceptual decision-making, with stronger perceptual bias associated with in-group information than with out-group information. This finding supports the narrower claim that social identification can influence a component of perceptual processing rather than only explicit judgment.

The finding does not, however, establish that identity determines phenomenal perceptual content. The relevant distinction is therefore:

Social identity → social influence → perceptual processing

rather than automatically:

Social identity → altered phenomenal perceptual content.

Recognition, misrecognition, and identity significance can contribute to recurrent patterns of attention and interpretation. Where such socially structured experience is sustained through repeated practice, it may also create conditions for perceptual learning. Goldstone and Barsalou (1998) show that perceptual similarity and discrimination can be tuned through learning and repeated task experience, supporting the possibility that sustained practice may alter sensitivity to relevant perceptual features.

Consider, for example, an inherited liturgical practice that becomes especially important when an external authority attempts to redefine, stigmatize, or prohibit it. Its physical appearance need not change; what can change is its social significance. Members may attend more closely to its features, interpret them through communal identity, and appraise attempts to alter the practice as threats to continuity. Repeated engagement could, under appropriate conditions, also contribute to learned sensitivity to distinctions within the practice, although that stronger perceptual claim requires empirical evidence.

Identity significance is therefore not itself perceptual content. Recognition, misrecognition, attention, belief, interpretation, and appraisal remain analytically distinct from perceptual content. Identity is relevant to communal perceptual content only insofar as socially structured experience can be shown to contribute to perceptual learning, sensitivity, discrimination, or perceptual presentation. This formulation places identity within the broader mechanism proposed by the article: identity can organize social significance and recurrent engagement, while perceptual learning provides the additional pathway through which socially transmitted practices might contribute to patterned perceptual experience.

9. The Syrian Christians of Malabar: Historical Context

The historical experience of the Syrian Christians of Malabar provides a useful case through which these distinctions can be examined.

The community developed within a long Christian tradition involving Syriac liturgy, ecclesiastical relationships, and narratives of apostolic origins, migration traditions, and forms of religious practice transmitted across generations.

The historical evidence, however, is complex. Different source traditions describe the community in different ways, and those descriptions were produced under different political and ecclesiastical circumstances.

The historical record must therefore be approached comparatively rather than through a single authoritative narrative.

Varghese (2017) emphasizes the development of Syrian Christian social identity through interaction between inherited Christian traditions and the surrounding

Indian social environment. His discussion identifies language, attire, habits, ritual practices, architecture, folk traditions, social organization, and historical consciousness as significant components in the community's continuing effort to maintain and negotiate social identity.

Meloottu (2023) similarly highlights the importance of Syriac ecclesiastical language and liturgy, local clergy, religious practices, clothing, jewelry, baptismal practices, ecclesiastical hierarchy, caste organization, and traditions concerning Thomas Christianity in the formation of Syrian Christian identity in Kerala.

These sources are useful because they demonstrate that religious identity was reproduced not merely through abstract propositions but through embodied, institutional, linguistic, ritual, and material practices. The historical case is nevertheless used here primarily as a historically grounded illustration of the proposed social mechanism, not as conclusive evidence that social meaning directly produces particular perceptual contents.

The historical material provides stronger evidence concerning social memory, representation, religious identity, institutional conflict, and appraisal than concerning the phenomenal character of individual experiences. Historical sources tell us how communities represented themselves, how institutions described them, what practices were transmitted, and how events were subsequently remembered. They do not normally provide direct access to the perceptual contents of individual historical actors.

Accordingly, the case supports the argument at different levels with different degrees of strength. It provides relatively strong historical grounds for claims concerning transmitted narratives, competing representations, identity, practices, and collective appraisal. It provides only indirect support for the possibility that sustained social learning might eventually affect perceptual discrimination.

This evidential distinction is important for the scope of the argument. The historical case therefore does not establish that communal social significance directly determines perceptual content. Rather, it illustrates how historically transmitted meanings, representations, practices, and identity commitments can structure the conditions under which certain features of the social and material environment become significant to members of a community.

10. Competing Historical Representations: "Nestorian," Portuguese Intervention, and the Synod of Diamper

The historical discussion requires a careful distinction between Portuguese ecclesiastical descriptions, indigenous community traditions, and later historiography. The designation "Nestorian" should not be presented as an uncontested description of the Syrian Christians. Schurhammer (1935) reports that non-Catholic and non-Malabar historians had generally followed what he described as the Portuguese view that the St. Thomas Christians were Nestorians, while also recording a contrary and continuous self-understanding within the Syro-Malabar tradition (p. vi). This historiographical contrast is important because the label documents a

mode of external classification rather than establishing that the community as a whole possessed a uniform Nestorian identity.

The term should therefore be treated here as a historically situated label whose meaning and use require distinction among Portuguese ecclesiastical representation, community tradition, and later historiography.

The significance of the designation therefore has at least two dimensions. Historically, it is evidence of how Portuguese ecclesiastical authorities represented the community. Historiographically, it became part of later European descriptions of the Saint Thomas Christians. Neither function establishes by itself that the entire community possessed a uniform "Nestorian" identity.

The Synod of Diamper of 1599 must likewise be understood within its institutional context. Zacharia's critical edition of the Acts and Decrees provides primary documentary evidence of the Synod's attempts to regulate the religious, liturgical, textual, and ecclesiastical life of the Saint Thomas Christians, including matters concerning doctrine, ecclesiastical authority, religious books, and established practices (Zacharia, 1994). The decrees therefore provide evidence not simply of what Portuguese ecclesiastical authorities said about the community, but of an institutional intervention through which external authority sought to define, regulate, and reshape aspects of communal religious life.

The historiographical significance of the Synod is also contested. Augustine and Saji (2025) show that later writers interpreted the Synod through substantially different historical frameworks.

Early Latin accounts tended to present the intervention of Alexis de Menezes positively, whereas later Protestant, Anglican, and other historians questioned the Synod's methods, authority, and consequences. The historical record therefore contains competing representations of what the intervention meant for the Saint Thomas Christians rather than a single uncontested account (Augustine & Saji, 2025). This distinction is important for the present argument because an externally produced classification should not automatically be treated as identical with the community's own historical self-understanding.

The Synod is therefore important not simply because of what it says about the community but because it represents an intervention through which an external ecclesiastical authority sought to define and regulate communal religious life.

The question of Portuguese intervention can therefore be formulated as follows: What did Portuguese authorities represent the community to be? and separately: How did members of the community understand themselves and their inherited practices? The difference between these questions is central to the theory of social significance.

The historical source base also indicates that indigenous narratives preserved traditions concerning apostolic origins, Mesopotamian migrations, ecclesiastical connections, and continuity of religious practice. These traditions should not automatically be treated as historically verified descriptions of every event. Their value for the present argument lies partly in demonstrating how the community

represented its own continuity and identity.

The historical case consequently contains competing layers of representations, as illustrated in Figure 1.

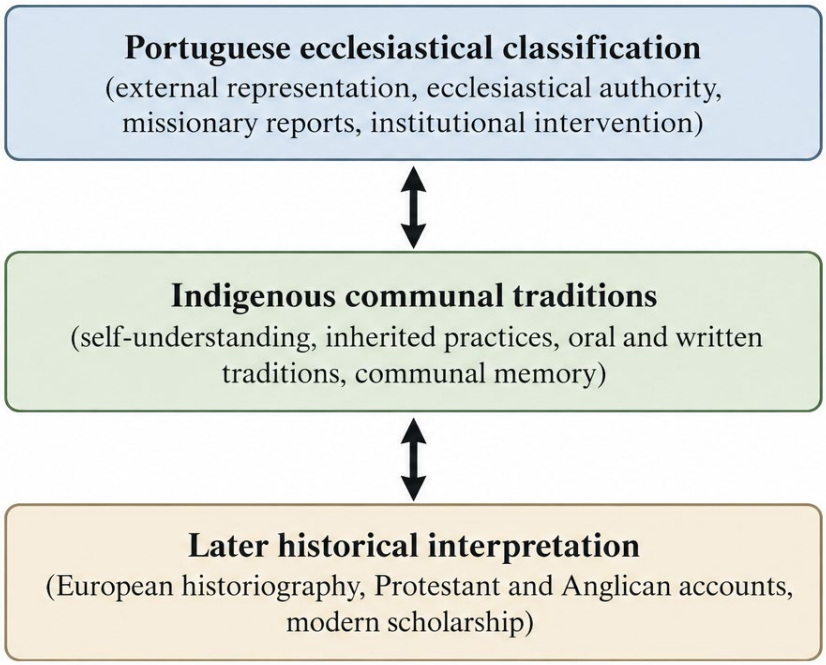


Figure 1. Competing layers of representation in the historical record.

The theoretical importance lies in how these representations acquired social authority and became incorporated into collective memory and identity.

11. Indigenous Narratives, Cultural Memory, and Communal Identity

The preceding theoretical discussion of collective and cultural memory is applied here to the historical record. Indigenous narratives are particularly important because they reveal forms of communal self-understanding that cannot be reconstructed solely from external descriptions.

The historical corpus includes narratives concerning Saint Thomas's mission, the Edessan migration, later Mesopotamian connections, ecclesiastical relationships, and continuity of religious practice (Varghese, 2017; Meloottu, 2023). Their importance should be distinguished from the question of their literal historical accuracy.

A narrative can be historically disputed and nevertheless be socially significant. The recurrence of a narrative suggests that it was available as a framework through which members of the community could understand their origins and continuity. This distinction is consistent with Halbwachs's understanding of socially framed memory and Assmann and Czaplicka's account of cultural memory (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Halbwachs, 1992).

The transmission of religious identity did not depend exclusively on written texts.

Varghese (2017) emphasizes the role of inherited practices and social forms in the continuing construction of Syrian Christian identity. These include cultural habits, language, dress, social organization, ritual practices, and historical consciousness.

Meloottu (2023) similarly describes the role of Syriac ecclesiastical language and liturgy, local clergy, baptism, ecclesiastical hierarchy, clothing, jewelry, and other embodied and institutional practices in the localization and reproduction of Syrian Christian identity.

These practices operated simultaneously as embodied religious practices, markers of communal identity, and carriers of historical memory. A ritual could be perceptually encountered as a material and bodily practice, while also attracting attention because of its social significance, evoking inherited narratives, reinforcing identity, and becoming an object of appraisal.

For the present historical analysis, the relevant inference is not that shared narratives produced shared perception. Rather, the narratives and practices supplied recurring social environments through which members could acquire related expectations, interpretive frameworks, and skills of discrimination. Whether such socially structured experience produced changes in perceptual learning remains a separate empirical question.

12. Resistance, Appraisal, Identity, and Collective Action

The resistance of the Syrian Christians to Portuguese ecclesiastical intervention provides an important example of the relationship between social meaning and action.

The later Coonan Cross Oath provides a historically significant example of collective resistance in this context. Augustine and Saji (2025) describe the Oath as a public protest by members of the Nazrani Christians of Malabar against submission to the Jesuit and Latin Catholic hierarchy and against Portuguese Padroado dominance in ecclesiastical and secular affairs.

The episode is therefore relevant to the present framework not simply as an event of resistance, but as a historical point at which institutional authority, inherited communal identity, and the appraisal of ecclesiastical intervention became connected with collective action (Augustine & Saji, 2025).

The Coonan Cross Oath should nevertheless not be interpreted as evidence that communal perceptual content caused resistance. The historical evidence more securely establishes a relationship among institutional conflict, communal identity, social significance, appraisal, and collective action. This distinction is consistent with the present framework, in which identity-constitutive appraisal provides one mechanism through which institutional conditions may acquire practical significance without being reduced either to perceptual content or to identity alone.

However, resistance should not be explained by identity or perceptual content

alone. Several alternative explanations must be considered.

First, ecclesiastical coercion may explain why intervention generated conflict. Attempts to regulate doctrine, liturgy, books, ecclesiastical authority, or religious practice could create institutional grievances independently of identity-based considerations.

Second, clerical leadership may have been important in transforming dissatisfaction into organized resistance. Religious leaders can provide interpretations, mobilize followers, establish institutional networks, and define appropriate responses.

Third, institutional divisions can shape the form and direction of resistance. Communities are rarely internally homogeneous. Rival authorities, competing ecclesiastical affiliations, and disagreements concerning accommodation can produce divergent responses.

Fourth, local political conditions influence whether resistance is feasible. Political alliances, regional power structures, and relations with local rulers can create opportunities or constraints for collective action.

Varghese (2017) emphasizes the significance of struggles over autonomy, authority, ecclesiastical organization, social status, clergy, and institutional control in the longer history of Syrian Christian identity. Meloottu (2023) likewise emphasizes that divisions and conflicts within the Syrian Christian field cannot be reduced to a single cause. Authority, caste hierarchy, status, missionary intervention, leadership, institutional divisions, and reform all contributed to different forms of communal development.

These factors do not eliminate the explanatory importance of identity. They instead show why identity should be treated as one factor among several.

The relevant question is therefore not simply why the community resisted, but how historically situated actors understood the significance of the conditions they confronted. This is where identity-constitutive appraisal becomes explanatory. The same institutional intervention can be understood as legitimate reform, tolerable accommodation, administrative interference, coercion, or a threat to communal continuity. Identity provides historically available categories through which such alternatives can be evaluated.

The model can therefore be represented as **Figure 2**:

These distinctions clarify the role of identity-constitutive appraisal. It does not replace structural explanation; rather, it concerns how historically situated actors interpreted institutional conditions. Shared identity did not produce uniform action: some actors resisted, others negotiated or accommodated institutional change. The claim is therefore modest: socially transmitted meanings may contribute to the appraisal through which institutional and political conditions become practically significant.

The separate perceptual pathway remains a hypothesis. The historical sources do not establish that communal perceptual content caused resistance or that the relevant social practices produced a shared phenomenal experience.

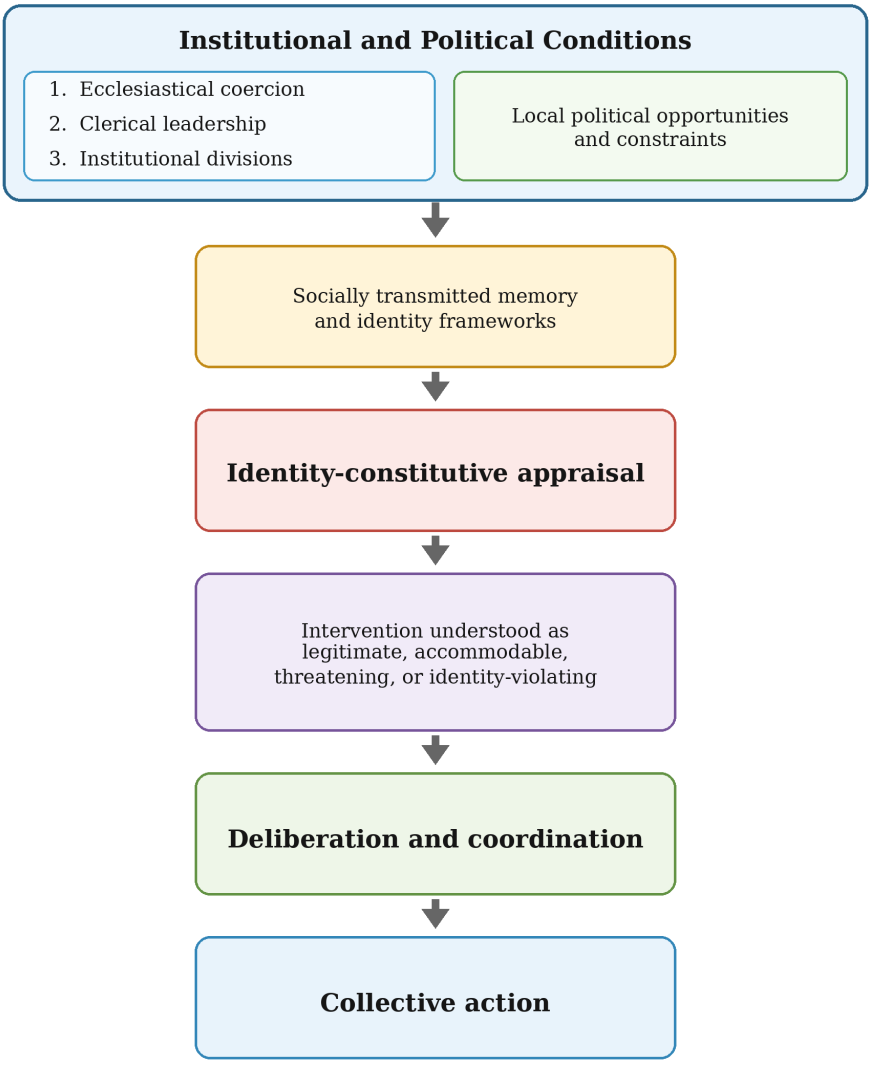


Figure 2. Identity-constitutive appraisal and the pathway to collective action.

13. The Central Theoretical Relationship

The preceding discussion suggests that the relationship between social significance and communal perceptual content should not be represented as a simple linear causal sequence. Socially structured perception can emerge through several partially distinct but interacting pathways.

Historical and institutional conditions shape discourse and representation; discourse and representation contribute to the formation of social significance and collective or cultural memory; and these, in turn, may influence attention, belief, interpretation, appraisal, and perceptual learning in different ways. The perceptual pathway is therefore narrower than the cognitive and evaluative pathways. Social influence contributes to communal perceptual content only where it produces sufficiently stable patterns in perceptual discrimination or experience.

Principal pathways

Level	Process	Function in proposed framework
1.	Historical and institutional conditions	Provide the social, political, religious, and institutional background in which perceptual and interpretive patterns develop.
2.	Discourse and representation	Transmit and organize socially available descriptions, categories, narratives, and representations.
3.	Social significance and collective/cultural memory	Stabilize what objects, practices, events, and symbols mean within a community and connect them with inherited identity and memory.
4.	Attention	Direct perceptual selection toward features that have become socially or practically salient.
5.	Belief, interpretation, and appraisal	Shape what is believed about, inferred from, or normatively evaluated in relation to what is perceived.
6.	Perceptual learning	Through repeated exposure and socially transmitted practices, contribute to learned perceptual capacities.
7.	Perceptual discrimination and patterned perceptual experience	Enable more refined discrimination of particular perceptual features and, where sufficiently stable, contribute to recurrently patterned perceptual experience that may constitute communal perceptual content.

These processes should not be understood as a single sequence in which every stage necessarily produces the next. Rather, they represent partially distinct pathways through which social conditions can influence individual cognition and perception.

Social influence and perceptual processing

Duderstadt et al. (2024) provide evidence relevant to the seventh-stage framework by showing that social influence can affect perceptual decision-making at a level associated with sensory-information accumulation. Their findings therefore occupy an intermediate position in the present model:

Social identity/social influence → perceptual processing

They do not establish:

Social identity/social influence → communal perceptual content

The latter requires evidence of patterned perceptual experience or discrimination across individuals and, ideally, evidence that the relevant pattern persists beyond immediate social influence.

Reciprocal interactions

The model also proposes several reciprocal relations. These are presented as possible mechanisms within the framework rather than as established causal laws.

Attention → perceptual learning

Attention can facilitate repeated exposure to selected features, providing conditions under which perceptual learning may occur.

Perceptual learning → perceptual discrimination

Perceptual learning can produce relatively lasting changes in sensitivity and discrimination, including through repeated experience and attention to task-relevant features (Goldstone, 1998). This provides a more specific empirical basis for the proposed connection between learning and perceptual discrimination.

Perceptual experience → social significance

Recurrent perceptual encounters may, in turn, reinforce the significance assigned to objects, practices, or symbols. Within the present framework, this is proposed as a reciprocal relation rather than as a universally established causal sequence.

Interpretation → attention

Interpretive frameworks may influence what individuals subsequently attend to, providing another possible feedback relation within the model.

Appraisal → action

Evaluative responses can guide individual or collective action.

Action → experience and collective memory

Actions can generate new experiences, events, and narratives that may subsequently enter collective or cultural memory.

The relationship is therefore recursive rather than strictly linear:

Social conditions → social significance → apprehension → action → new social experience → collective/cultural memory → renewed social significance

Accordingly, the term communal perceptual content applies only where evidence supports a specifically perceptual effect—where socially transmitted practices, learning, or expertise contribute to relatively stable patterns of perceptual discrimination or experience. Shared beliefs, memories, interpretations, and appraisals do not qualify as perceptual content merely because they are socially shared.

This formulation avoids two opposite errors. The first is individualistic reductionism: treating perception as wholly independent of social learning, practice, and cultural environment. The second is social reductionism: treating every shared belief, memory, interpretation, or appraisal as perceptual content.

The present argument occupies a middle position. Social worlds can structure individual perceptual and cognitive capacities, but different forms of social influence must be distinguished conceptually and, where possible, supported by appropriate empirical evidence.

14. What the Syrian Christian Case Contributes to the Theory

The Syrian Christian case contributes to the theory in three main respects. First, it illustrates how competing external and internal representations, together with institutional authority, can organize the same historical community differently (Varghese, 2017; Meloottu, 2023).

Second, it shows how inherited narratives, religious practices, language, social organization, and embodied cultural forms can reproduce communal identity across generations. The sequence from the Synod of Diamper to the later Coonan Cross Oath illustrates how institutional intervention can become connected with communal appraisal and collective action (Zacharia, 1994; Augustine & Saji, 2025). This historical connection should be distinguished from the causal claim that perceptual content caused resistance.

Third, and most importantly for the present theory, the case establishes the limits of historical inference. Historical sources can document transmitted narratives, practices, representations, identity, conflict, and action, but they do not provide direct access to the phenomenal perceptual contents of individual historical actors. The case therefore supports the historical plausibility of the social mechanism rather than the stronger perceptual claim.

15. Collective Memory as a Structural Analogue of Phenomenal Character

The comparison between collective memory and phenomenal character requires a precise qualification. Phenomenal character concerns what an experience is like for an individual subject, whereas collective memory concerns socially organized ways in which an inherited past becomes available and significant to members of a community. The comparison is therefore structural rather than ontological (Bayne, 2009).

Collective memory performs a different but structurally related function. Through narratives, commemorative practices, symbols, institutions, and other forms of cultural transmission, it organizes how an inherited past becomes available to members as historically connected and relevant to collective identity (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Halbwachs, 1992). In this sense, collective memory provides a historical horizon within which individuals encounter and understand the present.

Alexander's (1988) account, as discussed by Żardecka (2021), helps explain how new impressions can be incorporated into horizons shaped by previous experience and culturally acquired patterns of typization, expectation, norms, and values. Bogotá's (2025) phenomenological analysis similarly supports the weaker claim that remembering can remain first-personal while acquiring an intersubjective dimension, without making the group itself a phenomenal subject.

Varghese (2017) and Meloottu (2023) identify the religious, cultural, institutional, linguistic, and embodied practices through which historical consciousness and identity are sustained, while Duderstadt et al. (2024) provide experimental evidence that social identity can influence perceptual decision-making and sensory-information accumulation. These sources support different layers of the framework, but neither the historical case nor the experimental study directly establishes communal perceptual content.

The analogy can therefore be stated as a relation of organized givenness under an aspect:

Phenomenal character

→ organizes how an object or event is given within individual conscious experience.

Collective memory

→ organizes how an inherited historical world becomes available as socially and identity-relevantly intelligible.

The shared structural feature is organized givenness under an aspect: phenomenal character concerns experiential givenness, whereas collective memory concerns socially inherited historical givenness.

The two remain ontologically distinct: phenomenal character belongs to individual conscious experience, whereas collective memory is distributed across representations, practices, narratives, institutions, and communicative processes. Collective memory should therefore not be identified with perceptual content.

Collective memory is relevant because it can organize how an inherited historical world becomes available within individual experience and social intelligibility. Its structural analogy to phenomenal character is limited to this relation of organized givenness; it does not imply collective qualia, collective consciousness, or a communal phenomenal field.

The analogy consequently provides a conceptual bridge between social-historical structures and individual experience while leaving open the empirical and philosophical question of whether such structures can enter perceptual content itself.

16. Conclusion

The relationship between social significance and perceptual content cannot be understood solely by treating perception as an isolated encounter between an individual and an external object. Perception develops within environments structured by experience, learning, language, practices, institutions, and social relations. At the same time, social influence should not be collapsed into belief, memory, interpretation, or appraisal.

Communal perceptual content is therefore used narrowly to refer to socially patterned features of individual perceptual experience arising where shared practices, histories, socialization, and perceptual learning contribute to sufficiently similar modes of perceptual discrimination or presentation across members of a community.

The philosophical and empirical literature supports different parts of this proposal. Frege and Russell clarify distinctions between objects and modes of presentation; contemporary philosophy of perception provides resources for specifying perceptual content; cognitive-penetration and perceptual-learning research raises the possibility of higher-level influence on perceptual processing; and Firestone and Scholl (2016) caution against treating every top-down effect as a change in perceptual content. Duderstadt et al. (2024) provide an empirical bridge between social influence and perceptual processing, but not direct evidence of communal perceptual content.

The Syrian Christian case is useful as historically grounded evidence of competing representations, inherited identity, religious practice, collective memory, institutional conflict, and communal appraisal. It does not provide direct evidence of the phenomenal perceptual contents of historical actors. The case therefore illustrates the social conditions under which the proposed mechanism could be in-

vestigated rather than establishing the stronger perceptual claim.

The central proposition is consequently modest: social significance can structure the conditions under which individuals perceive, attend to, interpret, appraise, and act upon their shared social world; where socially transmitted practices and learning also shape perceptual discrimination or presentation, sufficiently similar patterns of individual perceptual experience may constitute communal perceptual content. The existence of such content remains a hypothesis requiring evidence that distinguishes perceptual change from changes in attention, judgment, memory, interpretation, or appraisal.

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Author Contributions

The author was solely responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, resources, visualization, project administration, and writing of the manuscript. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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