

**BOOK REVIEW: PAPINEAU, D. *The Metaphysics of Sensory Experience*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2021, 176 Pages).**

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**Abstract:** This is a book review of "The Metaphysics of Sensory Experience" by David Papineau.

In his newly released book, *The Metaphysics of Sensory Experience*, Papineau devotes himself to an area of the philosophy of mind—the philosophy of perception or of sensory experience—that has an interface with epistemology and metaphysics in general. This is made clear from the start when he states that the book addresses a specific question: “[w]hat is the metaphysical nature of the conscious properties we enjoy when we have sensory experiences?” (p. 1). The book is worthy of several accolades: it is clear, well designed and, above all, it contains solid original arguments and theses. Given this, reading the book is highly recommended for anyone engaged in the field.

The book is structured in four chapters. The first chapter is meant to “clear the ground.” It comprehends thirteen sections. As the title indicates, the intention here is to clarify the sense in which the author is using the main concepts. So, section 1.1 handles the difference between sensations and perceptions. Section 1.2 deals with the distinction between sensations and cognitions. Section 1.3 discusses the meaning of properties and experiences. From sections 1.4 to 1.13, the author introduces the main doctrines in the field of philosophy of perception: naïve realism (1.4-1.8), sense-data theories (1.9), and representationalism (1.10-1.13). In 1.10, Papineau points out the key difference between what he calls essential and contingent representationalism: according to the first, phenomenal properties are or supervene on representational properties; while according to the second, both properties are only contingently related. In 1.11, Papineau distinguishes what he calls “naturalist representationalism” (tracking representationalism) from what he calls “phenomenal intentionalism” (narrow representationalism).

The second chapter is devoted to a criticism of forms of representationalism, namely the general claim that conscious properties are representational properties of sensory

experience. It comprehends fourteen sections. It starts by arguing against the implausibility of naturalist representationalism. This comprises sections 2.1-2.6. In the following section 2.7, Papineau attempts to rebut the main argument that supports all kinds of representationalism, namely the traditional claim that sensory experience is transparent. In sections 2.8 and 2.9, he prepares the ground for his main argument against representationalism of all stripes: the here-and-now argument (section 2.10). The last sections (2.11-2.14) are corollaries of his arguments.

The third chapter is devoted to developing Papineau's own qualitative view. In the opening sections 3.1-3.2, Papineau presents his view. In the subsequent sections 3.3-3.4, he distinguishes his view from closely related views. In the following sections (3.5-3.6), he introduces the ideas of *quasi-objects* and *quasi-properties*. The idea is crystal clear: we are never conscious of particulars and distal properties, but rather of their surrogates in sensory experience (*quasi-objects* and *quasi-properties*). From 3.7 to the end of the chapter (3.10), the goal is to clarify the nature of those quasi-entities in a way that avoids mistaking them for intentional objects.

In the fourth and last chapter, Papineau provides us an account for his theory of introspection and for the close relation of his qualitative view with adverbialism. In the first section 4.1, he reiterates the difference between his view and the sense-data theories. Next (4.2), he explains the difference between consciousness and awareness. In the following section 4.3, he resumes his view about transparency of sensory experience. In sections 4.4-4.6, he presents his own view of introspection of phenomenal properties of people. In the last sections (4.7-4.11), Papineau resumes his theory of phenomenal concepts to account for the putative immediate introspection of phenomenal properties.

The central tenet of Papineau's book is the claim *that conscious properties are intrinsic properties of people* (p. 6). As he likes

to put it, *consciousness is something that lights up inside the skin* when sensory experience takes place; regardless of what is going on outside the skin (p. 50 & p. 62). By contrast, representational properties are broadly individuated: it is up to the environment of particulars and distal properties what people's sensory state represents and whether their representational efforts succeed.

Yet, the tacit assumption of Papineau's qualitative view is that consciousness is always narrowly individuated. There are several reasons that substantiate this assumption. For one thing, according to the qualitative view, intrinsic duplicates are *necessarily* phenomenal duplicates *regardless of what is going on in the subject's environment* (p. 6). Again, "conscious properties are intrinsic properties of people" (p. 6). For another, Papineau appeals to Block's Inverted Earth scenario against representationalism, assuming, therefore, that broad content of the color of the sky might change from Earth to Inverted Earth, while phenomenal character remains unaltered. Papineau's own cosmic brain scenario against representationalism also supports the assumption (p. 79). The moral is *that conscious properties are not sensitive to environmental changes*. But the last tenet of Papineau's qualitative view is as follows: there is nothing in between that could bridge the gap between the narrowly individuated consciousness and broadly individuated contents (such as narrow contents, content-schemas, propositional functions, etc.). Given this, it should not come as a surprise that conscious and representational properties turn out to be incommensurable (p. 71).

Now we want to formulate what strikes us as to be the main problem for Papineau's qualitative view. To be sure, assuming that conscious properties are narrowly and that representational properties are broadly individuated and, further, that there is nothing in between, Papineau claims that it is hard to see how particulars and distal properties

make their way into consciousness. As he puts it: "it sounds little better than magic" (p. 63).

Our point is that the opposite claim is also true. Again, if conscious properties are narrowly individuated while representational properties are broadly individuated, and there is nothing in between, it is also hard to see *how consciousness finds its way into the outside world* of particulars and distal properties. It is hard to see how consciousness could *engage* with the outside world. To make Papineau's words our own: "it sounds little better than magic." (p. 63). This main problem splits into four related objections.

The first is the epistemological one. If we are conscious only of *quasi-objects* or *quasi-properties* rather than particulars and distal properties, the question is: how could experience provide evidence for the correspondent perceptual beliefs? Again, if I am only to see a *quasi-ball*, how could this experience entitle me to believe that I am seeing that yellow ball straight ahead of me? The moral is that Papineau's qualitative view threatens to make conscious properties *epistemologically idle*.

The second problem is the introspective one. Papineau claims that most of the times we know introspectively the phenomenal properties, say the quale blueness, by means of those perceptual beliefs that our sensory experience naturally inclines us to form (p. 41). Once again, since conscious properties are narrowly while representational properties are broadly individuated, to know the broadly individuated content of the perceptual belief that my sensory experience inclines me to have, I have to know beforehand *the environment where I am embedded*.

Block's Inverted Earth exemplifies the problem (see Block 1990). You are kidnapped, drugged, and taken there, but while you are drugged you have inverting lenses inserted in your eyes, so you don't notice the difference when you wake up. After a period there, your visual experience of the

sky inclines you naturally to believe that the sky is yellow while what your visual experience is of the color of the sky is the quale blueness. Now to know whether you are experiencing the quale blueness or the quale yellowness, you have to certify for yourself whether you are on Earth or on Inverted Earth (or whether you are an embodied person or a brain that coagulates by cosmic happenstance in interstellar space.) The qualitative view threatens to make introspective self-knowledge of qualia impossible.

The third problem is how to account for intended behavior. Since Papineau recognizes only broad contents, the idea of narrowly individuated behavior is out of question for him. Consider a footballer, who intends to kick *that* yellow ball that stands straight ahead of her. This intended behavior must be broadly individuated, that is, it must be individuated by appealing to *that particular*. In other words, what the footballer intends to do is to kick that particular (rather than any other qualitatively identical particular). But, according to Papineau's qualitative view, none of those entities are *present* to her conscious experience. Given this, consciousness is at most responsible for the bodily reaction to proximal stimulation. The moral to be drawn is that Papineau's qualitative view threatens *to make conscious properties causally idle*.

Now, Papineau might bite the bullet and assume that consciousness *as such* is both epistemologically and causally idle. What epistemically entitles one's perceptual beliefs is only the unconscious content of the correspondent sensory experience. There is no such a thing as "phenomenal evidence" (it is worth noticing that no one needs to assume an internalist epistemology to recognize the existence of *conscious evidence*, see Schellenberg 2018, pp. 171-179). Likewise, what accounts for intended behavior is the unconscious content of sensory experience and perceptual

beliefs. The tacit assumption is that it makes no difference whether the content of experience is conscious or not.

Fair enough. Blindsight people—who are cortically blind due to lesions in their striate cortex, also known as the primary visual cortex or V1—are able to respond with success, at levels significantly above chance, to visual stimuli that they do not consciously see (often in a forced-response or guessing situation). However, their success is below the level of normal sight people. Now, since there is no reason to deny that they are representing their environment without consciousness, *consciousness as such* must make a difference for successful behavior.

But the absence of consciousness not only threatens the success of some intended behavior. Cognitive scientists have long distinguished conscious from unconscious or subliminal representations, recognizing thereby that nonconscious states also have a significant impact on behavior. Let us consider a simple example. You have a subliminal presentation of the word “doctor.” Now, if you contemplate a list of words you will be quicker to recognize the word “nurse” than other listed words. The question is: is that unconscious representation suitable to account for intended behavior? We do not think so. If the footballer intends to kick the ball, she needs more than a subliminal representation of the particular in question. She needs to consciously represent *that* particular thing. If that particular is not present to the footballer's conscious experience, it is hard to see how she could initiate the intended behavior of kicking the ball in the first place.

Finally, the fourth problem concerns Papineau's here-and-now argument against representationalism. Here is the argument:

“(1) Instantiations of conscious sensory properties constitute concrete facts with causes and effects.

- (2) Instantiations of representational properties constitute abstract facts that cannot feature as causes or effects.
- (3) Conscious sensory properties are not representational properties.” (p. 72)

The second premise looks problematic. Since representationalism is the target of the argument, it makes little sense to assume that the represented uninstantiated property is the *triggering cause* of the local instantiation of a conscious property (for the difference between structuring and triggering causes, see Dretske 1988). Indeed, as the representationalist claims that phenomenal and representational properties are one and the same or, alternatively, that the phenomenal properties *supervene on* representational properties, a causal relation must be ruled out here. The reasonable assumption here is that represented uninstantiated properties *ground* the phenomenal properties in the sense of Fine 2010.

Be that as it may. Suppose you suffer from a panic attack. And suppose, just for the sake of argument, that what it is like to undergo a panic attack is just the representation that you are about to die (representationalism). Papineau reasons as follows: if what it is like to suffer a panic attack is just to represent your imminent death, *the represented uninstantiated imminent death* must be what causes in you what it is like to suffer a panic attack (the second premise). But you are hallucinating: you are not about to die. So, the representation of the uninstantiated property of your imminent death could not constitute your panic attack experience (the supposition is that the broad content contains the uninstantiated property).

To properly address this issue we have to appeal to your past, to your genetic inheritance, etc., that is, to something that is certainly not instantiated here-and-now, but was once



instantiated in the past. Let us call this a *missing broad explanation* for the here-and-now instantiation of a conscious property. One quite simplified account goes like this. You suffer from PTS (post-traumatic stress): you saw both your grandparents dying right after having chest pain. Since then, for this and other reasons, you have mistakenly associated chest pain with the past veridical representation of instantiation of the property of imminent death. Given this, the feeling of chest pain might trigger in *you* a panic attack. Your chest pain, due to your past, makes you represent your imminent death.

Now, against Papineau's assumption, the representation of your imminent death is *not really causing* you a panic attack experience. Instead, what causes you to have a panic attack is something else, namely the chest pain. You are undergoing a panic attack experience *due to the fact that* you are misrepresenting (hallucinating) your imminent death (grounding relation). Since you have *misconnected* in your mind chest pain with the representation of someone's imminent death, it is hard to deny that the *misrepresentation* (hallucination) of your imminent death metaphysically *constitutes* (in the sense of grounding) your panic attack experience.

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