

David Papineau, The Metaphysics of Sensory Experience

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The opening paragraph states the book's Central Question (CQ): 'what is the metaphysical nature of the conscious properties we enjoy when we have sensory experiences?' (1). Papineau's answer arrives soon after: 'conscious sensory properties are intrinsic qualitative properties of people' (1)—so, a purified qualia theory (7), and descendent of a bygone doctrine of 'adverbialism' (83). Why? Intrinsic, because—against a factivist/relationalist (Papineau: 'naïve realist')—not relational (1.4–8); qualitative, because—against a representationalist/intentionalist—not representational (ch. 2).¹ Papineau acknowledges that the answer is counterintuitive: 'intuition [] take[s] sensory properties to be *world-involving*, not intrinsic properties of subjects' (2); but manoeuvres to explain the putative tendency to error (4.3, 4.4, 4.8).

The CQ is laden with jargon: 'conscious properties'; 'sensory experiences'. Papineau helpfully follows with an ostensive definition: 'I am looking at a yellow ball in the middle of my garden lawn. In so doing, I am having a conscious visual experience, constituted by my instantiating certain conscious properties, properties that I would cease to possess if I closed my eyes' (1). Further thickening the jargon are various associations—with 'consciousness': 'experience' will always be understood as implying *conscious* sensory experience' (11); with 'feeling': 'my conscious experience [is] what it feels like for me to see the yellow ball' (16); with 'what it is like': 'the conscious character of an experience is what it is like for its subject' (39). Putative intuitions of intrinsicity carry much weight: 'conscious character [is] a here-and-now illumination of the subject's mind' (39); of a 'cosmic brain in a vat' intrinsically just like Papineau's brain, Papineau 'take[s] it that this being would share all [Papineau's] conscious sensory experiences' (6; more brain: 92–3, 112; more generally: 7, 1.4, 1.8, 37, 50, and others).

I quote liberally because my own words can express neither the CQ nor Papineau's answer. On my best guess (compare Hellie 2007, appendix), Papineau's exemplar 'sensory experience', '*Jennifer visually experiencing a yellow ball*' (15), blurs together three Conflatanda: Jennifer's (A) seeing a yellow ball;² (B) 'having evidence' aka 'being aware' aka 'observing' that she sees a yellow ball; (C) 'treating things as if' she has evidence/is aware/observes that she sees a yellow ball.

The Conflatanda, though distinct, are amenable to conflation because closely related in patterns of familiar occurrence. (B) entails (A); though not vice versa, our typical congress with (A) is through (B). Presumably (B) and (C) require one another, at least across ordinary/typical/'Good' cases in which Jennifer is straightforwardly intelligible.³

Papineau's 'conscious properties' draw aspects variously from the Conflatanda. *Mental*: surely (B) and (C); but, following Ryle (1949, 157, 204–5), not (A). *Conscious*: (C) seems to involve (B) being putatively involved in 'what it is like' for Jennifer, so let's say yes for both; but (A) is nonmental, so no. *Intrinsic*: not (A), and nor, thus, (B); but perhaps (C), through Bad Case dissociation from (B). *Qualitative*: at least in part, (A); still, surely neither (B) nor (C). *Nonrepresentational*: surely (A); because we can ask of how Jennifer 'treats things' whether it is true or not (similarly to a belief), perhaps not (C); (B), contentive so yes, factive so no.

Turn to Papineau against relationalism (1.8). His 'main objection' protests of 'little sense' in the relationalist's imputed demand 'to separate conscious properties from introspective powers': even if 'human subjects are not always introspectively infallible about the conscious states they are in', relationalism

¹I sideline a brief treatment of 'sense-datum' theory (1.9).

²Which may involve certain intrinsic physiological facts peculiar to Jennifer's visual system.

³And, arguably (Hellie 2020), intense dialectical pressure toward their conflation is exerted by core doctrinal commitments of the analytic philosophy of mind.

unwisely ‘posits a kind of conscious difference’ between Good and Bad cases ‘which even the best-placed introspecting subjects would always be unable to discern’—a ‘radical move’ which ‘threatens to loosen our hold on the very concept of consciousness itself’ (17)!

But relationalists need posit no such (so to speak, *essentially elusive*) (A)- or (B)-phenomena which ‘can *never* be apparent to subjects from the inside’ (17). A better way (compare [Hellie 2011](#)) recognizes that (C)-phenomena consist in self-interpretation of (B)-phenomena. Such self-interpretation requires a presupposition about the (A)-phenomena: this presupposition is true just if the (C)-phenomena align with the (B)-phenomena (just if the subject’s overall mental state is fully rationally intelligible).⁴ Of course, whether specific (A)-phenomena are *presupposed* to be Good-type or Bad-type is crosscut by whether they *are*. So Badness consists in Bad-type (A)-phenomena *plus a mistaken presupposition* (the cosmic brain, say, mistakenly presupposes itself to be terrestrial human Papineau). I would be disinclined to rank those guilty of such a mistake among the ‘best-placed introspecting subjects’.

Might the (C)-phenomena slot into a Papineau-friendly ‘metaphysics of conscious properties’, as properties of *self-representing certain (B)-phenomena*? Unfortunately, the Bad Case presupposition, because false of the (A)-phenomena, is inconsistent with the content of the (B)-phenomena; the latter are *evidence*, and thus *believed*—so Bad Case subjects have inconsistent beliefs, and are not (fully) rationally intelligible. But reasoning about the mind is an enterprise of making one another rationally intelligible—putting any *metaphysics* subsuming such Bad Cases at serious risk of theoretical overreach.

Turn to Papineau’s dilemma against representationalism.⁵ First horn: On a ‘naturalist’, Fodoresque view, representation consists in ‘vehicles’ correlatively tracking environmental features. The result ‘is strange indeed. The phenomenal character of my visual experience is here-and-now. My conscious experience as of a yellow ball is immediately present to me. Yet’, says the naturalist, ‘this feeling’ depends on ‘whichever environmental conditions that vehicle happens *generally* to be correlated with’. That this ‘here-and-now feeling derives from such a distant correlation’ is a doctrine Papineau ‘find[s] hard to take seriously’ (51). I agree that this is all hard to take seriously.

Second horn: A ‘phenomenal intentionalism’ ([Horgan and Tienson 2002](#), [Chalmers 2004](#), [Kriegel 2013](#)) set up to recover this ‘here-and-now feeling’ claims instead that ‘sensory experience is intrinsically directed, pointing out to a world beyond itself, even if this directedness fails to fix any definite truth conditions without the assistance of the subject’s environment’ (75). To be sure, the ‘experiential properties we instantiate [] display the kind of constancy and coherence that warrants talk’ (106) to this effect. Unfortunately, ‘entities get to be representational because of their relationship to things beyond themselves[; so] if we take a system of entities that are not yet so related, we cannot render them representational just by adding further such entities’ (107); ‘content can’t be manufactured simply by adding contentless arrows to a set of marks that are not themselves contentful’ (108)—‘it is difficult to see how ‘paint’ itself could ever get to ‘point’ ’ (107). Difficult indeed. (Still, the phenomenal intentionalist—drawn along by the glint, just up ahead, of a unified ground for the mysteries of intentionality and consciousness—will perhaps brace this difficulty with a more staunch resilience.)

Turn to ‘transparency’, that imagistic pillar of a towering literature, considered here at length (esp. 2.7–9). The contemporary wellsprings of this discussion—the well-known observations from [Harman 1990](#) about Eloise and the presented tree—attack ‘intrinsic qualities of experience’ on behalf of functionalism. Although various claims about representation shore up the attack, Harman advances no posit of ‘conscious properties we enjoy when we have sensory experiences’, hence advocates no view on the CQ. Contrastingly, [Tye \(1992\)](#), in pursuit of the CQ, would soon assemble the shoring-up remarks into representationalism, rechanneling the dialectical energy of the transparency observations to support that doctrine. Many, many subsequent representationalists would follow suit.

⁴All theories must recognize some prospect of cases fitting this structure—even the staunch internalism of [Chalmers 2010b](#), 269–70: Bad Cases yield unintelligibility in the exchange between [Hawthorne 2006](#) and [Chalmers 2010c](#), 173.

⁵The attack gets rolling with a ‘prima facie difference between [conscious sensory] character and [representational] content’: the former ‘is what [an experience] is like for its subject, a here-and-now illumination of the subject’s mind’, the latter ‘the way [the experience] answers to some [] specification involving objects and properties in the environment’ (39). But (i) I find no meaning in this talk of ‘here-and-now illumination of the subject’s mind’. And (ii) as above, ‘what it is like’ and ‘way the experience answers to a specification’ apply (respectively) to (B)- and (C)-phenomena, maybe—or maybe the other way round?—either way, not so ‘very different’ (39).

Papineau joins Tye and followers in framing the observation in the context of support for the doctrine (54, 59). This package of observation and doctrine, Papineau contends, predicts that ‘uninstantiated properties can be *present* in sensory experience’ (65). But Papineau ‘[does] not understand how some supposed relation between [his] mind and an uninstantiated property can possibly constitute his here-and-now consciousness’ (62). No indeed.⁶

But the transparency observations have life outside any supposed boost to representationalism—in stripping the pretheoretic world of the materials for Papineau’s adverbialism. Literarily, Harman’s remarks arguably (Helie 2020) descend from passages in Ryle 1949, intended to restrict the mental to the rational/intentional/normative/contentive and exclude the qualitative/sensory. Facially, Harman is saying that we pretheoretically recognize no ‘mental qualities’—not even implicitly, because it doesn’t help to prompt us with the explicit question of their existence. In context, Harman’s respondents, Block (1990, 59, 71, 73) and Shoemaker (1991, 521), understood this well, reiterating in reponse their longstanding (compare Shoemaker 1975) acknowledgement that qualia are theoretical posits.

Papineau deftly accommodates adverbialism to various ‘representationalist transparency’ claims—though his manoeuvres lose force against associated claims, indifferent to representationalism and more bluntly put (though to my mind no less plausible for it). For instance: *We use representational language to describe experiences*; Papineau: ‘We often identify things by citing properties that they possess only contingently’ (44)—bluntly: there is no Papineau-friendly language. Or: *We can’t turn attention from representational to intrinsic properties*; Papineau: ‘My position is that all the elements of experience are qualitative, and none are representational, so there is no question of shifting introspective focus from one to the other’ (120)—bluntly: ‘introspective focus’ (whatever that may be) is never on ‘mental qualities’ (whatever that could mean).

Papineau might yet follow the earlier qualia theorists: issue a theoretical posit, known and knowable only at the end of his dialectic. But then—paraphrasing Papineau against relationalism—‘human subjects are uniformly mistaken about the conscious states they are in’; cases Good and Bad alike possess ‘conscious attributes which even the best-placed introspecting subjects are unable to discern’, ‘threatening our hold on the very concept of consciousness itself’. Above, the relationalist rejoined by appealing to a mistaken presupposition. So: perhaps, duly heeding Papineau’s teachings, we can, at long last, locate those intrinsic mental qualities . . . or no?

Turn to the verdict of a CQ Skeptic:

The CQ has only bad answers. Relationalism as sketched here may escape Papineau’s attack, but to no metaphysical benefit; Papineau’s arguments expose unpalatable consequences of representationalism; ‘blunt’ transparency fells Papineau’s adverbialism—so sensory experience has no metaphysics. Adapting Papineau’s advice (on another matter): ‘if this is where [the CQ] leads us, I say we should have rejected it from the start’ (63). Eschew the jargon—this compels discrimination of the Conflatanda: dispersing the CQ; unwinding spurious dispute over illusions.

The book is Nonskeptical. Indeed, no trace of Skepticism shadows its dialectic—a surprisingly bold restriction: after all, jargon is a red rag to the skeptically-minded; and a jargon-free framing of the CQ escapes my imagination.

Let’s wrap up. The book is mainly commendable in scholarship, dialectics, and style. Relevant Nonskeptical work is broadly and generously surveyed; views considered are stated fairly and with good precision. Shibboleths are frequently overturned by incisive exegesis; much dogma falls to clear, no-nonsense criticism; many foundational lacunae in the literature are brightly illuminated. The efficient prose is fun to read. At the book’s end, Nonskeptics are painted into a tiny dialectical corner: if it is too cramped, there is nowhere to go but out.

⁶The back sections of ch. 2 promote the incomprehension to an objection (72): conscious property instances are ‘concrete’; contrastingly, representational property instances are ‘abstract’. The latter claim broaches an immense terrain—a commendable first contact for this literature.

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