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# Papineau on Sensory Experience

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David Papineau's characteristically clever, original, and forthright *The Metaphysics of Sensory Experience* is a pleasure to read.[1] From my perspective, the book presents a kind of looking-glass world where black is white and up is down. Naturally from Papineau's perspective my own views look equally bonkers.

I will touch on three topics: Papineau's case against property-awareness, his diagnosis of the phenomenon of "transparency," and his account of colour similarity.

## 1. Consciousness and Awareness of Properties

Consider Papineau's signature example: "I am looking at a yellow ball in the middle of my garden lawn." "In so doing," he continues, "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).

Switching to myself for convenience, what are these "conscious properties" that I possess when I look at the yellow ball? Well, I see the yellow ball, and the ball looks yellow to me. So here are two candidates: *seeing the yellow ball*, and *being such that the ball looks yellow to me*. Neither of those are what Papineau has in mind, since without the ball, I could have neither property, and on Papineau's view,

> conscious sensory properties are intrinsic qualitative properties of people. When I have a visual experience of a yellow ball, for example, I have a certain conscious property, a certain feeling, which does not essentially

[1] Papineau 2021; all page references are to this book unless otherwise noted.

Alex Byrne, *Papineau on Sensory Experience* In: *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Mind Volume 3*. Edited by: Uriah Kriegel, Oxford University Press. © Alex Byrne 2023. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198879466.003.0012

> involve any relations to anything outside me. Taken purely in itself, my state does not guarantee the presence of an actual yellow ball .... (1)

This quotation shows why substituting 'a ball' for 'the ball' doesn't help: *seeing a yellow ball* can't be a Papineau-style conscious property, because it is not intrinsic. Let's try something even less committal. I *seem* to see a yellow ball. Hallucinating a yellow ball is one way of seeming to see one, so this looks more promising. Perhaps hallucinations *do* involve relations to things "outside me," but it is standardly assumed that they don't, and anyway we want to characterize sensory experiences in a way that leaves this issue open.

*Seeming to see a yellow ball*, understood in the natural way, is one of Papineau's "conscious sensory properties." If I see a yellow ball in good light, and imagine someone having a "phenomenologically identical" experience, then (in the intended interpretation) I am imagining someone who "seems to see a yellow ball." In Papineau's preferred formulation, this conscious sensory property is "*visually experiencing a yellow ball*" (15).

It is important to add a caveat. If someone seems to see a yellow ball on the lawn, one might think she is inclined to believe that there is a yellow ball on the lawn, or at least before her. Moreover, this is not a contingent connection: seeming to see a yellow ball necessarily suggests the presence of a yellow ball, even though it is a suggestion than can be resisted. That, however, is not Papineau's view. Consider the words 'Hay una bola amarilla'. Inscribed by some purported truth-teller, they do suggest the presence of a yellow ball—but only to someone who understands Spanish. To a monolingual Chinese speaker, they suggest nothing. And those very same orthographically individuated marks, appearing in a world in which language users never evolved, have no semantic connection to balls, the colour yellow, or anything else. Papineau thinks that *seeming to see a yellow ball* is analogous:

> Imagine a cosmic brain in a vat, a perfect duplicate of my brain that coagulates by cosmic happenstance in interstellar space, together with sustaining vat, and proceeds to operate just like my brain for some minutes, with the same sensory cortical inputs, motor cortical outputs, and intervening neuronal processes. I take it that this being would share all my conscious sensory experiences. Yet its sensory states would represent nothing. They would lack the kind of systematic connections with worldly circumstances required for representational significance. They would no

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> more have a representational content than would the marks 'Elvis Presley once visited Paris' traced out by the wind on some mountain on Mars. (6)

On Papineau's view, seeming to see a yellow ball has no more connection to yellowness and sphericity than it does to blueness and triangularity. When a cosmic brain in a vat seems to see a yellow ball, it is not inclined in the slightest to form beliefs about the presence of a yellow ball.

On a rival view, when someone seems to see a yellow ball, she may not see a ball, but she is aware (or is in a position to be aware) of some worldly items, yellowness and sphericity—those properties are "present in" her experience. There is thus an intimate connection between seeming to see a yellow ball and yellowness, a connection that is absent between seeming to see a yellow ball and blueness. We can call this the *Moorean view*, since it can be found in Moore's "The Refutation of Idealism" (1903).[2]

On the Moorean view, seeing a yellow object in good light is one way of becoming aware of yellowness. But someone can be aware of yellowness even though she is not aware of any yellow object, as in illusion or hallucination. Papineau thinks this is completely wrong: "I don't see how *any* worldly properties can be present in experience. The whole idea strikes me as quite misplaced" (60).

Does Papineau think that *any* properties, worldly or unworldly, can be present in experience? He does: "The only properties 'present in' experience are conscious properties of people, not worldly properties" (118). People are just as worldly as beachballs and lemons, so in that sense conscious properties are also worldly, but it's clear what Papineau means. When I look at the yellow ball, the only properties present in my experience are properties of *me*—specifically, conscious sensory properties like *seeming to see a yellow ball*.

Papineau has two lines of objection against the Moorean view. First, he thinks that the idea "that uninstantiated properties can be *present* in sensory experience" is "inconsistent with the here-and-now nature of conscious experience" (65). He explains his reasoning in this passage:

> As I see it, when I instantiate the property of *visually experiencing a yellow ball*, this results in a local fact, a state which is here-and-now, in line with the immediate nature of my sensory consciousness. By contrast, if I am

[2] Papineau cites Moore's paper in connection with the famous passage about "transparency" (73, fn. 12).

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> mentally related to some property, but without instantiating it, then *the resulting relational fact is by no means local, but extended into whatever distal realm the property in question inhabits*. That is why I say that mental relations to properties as such, abstracted from their instances, cannot constitute the here-and-now nature of sensory experience.
>
> (66; second emphasis added)

Suppose I see a yellow ball on the lawn, and am thereby mentally related to yellowness (instantiated by the ball, not by me). Here is a relational fact: I am visually aware that a yellow ball is on the lawn. That fact involves a relation between me and another fact, the latter itself involving a relation between the yellow ball and the lawn. The fact that I am visually aware that a yellow ball on the lawn is not "local" to me, in the sense that it does not supervene on facts about how I am intrinsically. Let us grant, for the sake of the argument, that this means that this fact "cannot constitute the nature of sensory experience," because sensory experience is local, confined to the "here-and-now."

But what about the (ostensible) fact that I am aware of yellowness? That is a relational fact, but it involves a relation to a property. According to the Moorean, that very fact obtains in a counterfactual situation in which the ball isn't yellow but merely looks that way, or in which I am hallucinating a yellow ball. The relational fact that I am aware of yellowness does not involve a relation to a ball, or an "instance" of yellowness (understood as a trope or particularized property). Admittedly, if the property or universal yellowness is spatially located in yellow objects, then when I am aware of yellowness (even when hallucinating) I am aware of an entity that is multiply located, with some locations being very distant. But the fact that I am aware of yellowness does not depend on the existence of these remote yellow objects; for all that has been said, that I am aware of yellowness may be a "local" fact, concerning how I am intrinsically—what is going on in the "distal realm" is irrelevant.[3]

Even granted the premise about the "here-and-now" nature of sensory experience, Papineau's first argument against the Moorean view seems to me not to succeed. (I do not grant the premise, but that is another story.)

Papineau's second objection turns on considerations of causation. Some facts are "*concrete*":

[3] See the exchange between Pautz 2019 and Block 2019, and Pautz 2021: 170–85.

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> constituted by some spatio-temporal particular (or particulars) instantiating some first-order property (or relation). *A ball being yellow* (or *on the table*) are concrete facts. These concrete facts are the kinds of items that can enter into causal relations. They are localized in space and time and have causes and effects. (66–7)

Non-concrete facts, for instance facts of pure arithmetic, are not "eligible to enter into causal relations" (71). The fact that I seem to see a yellow ball is not one of those, because: "it can result from concrete causes, such as the yellow ball being nearby, and can give rise to concrete effects, such as my kicking the ball" (67). However,

> relations between human subjects and properties as such, abstracted from their instances, do not amount to concrete facts. If I bear some mental relation to the property of yellowness as such, even though yellowness is not instantiated anywhere nearby, this cannot be the kind of concrete local fact that is capable of entering into causal relations. Since yellowness as such lives in the realm of abstract properties, this relational fact involves me, the abstract property of yellowness, and some mental relation joining the two. This relational fact is by no means here-and-now. (67)

If the ostensible fact that I am aware of yellowness is not concrete, and so causally impotent, there is no reason to believe in such a thing.

But why is that ostensible fact not "here-and-now"? The "realm of abstract properties" is not literally a *distal* realm, *outside* the perceiver. Notice that Papineau (rightly) countenances relational facts among the concrete, for instance *that the ball is on the table*. Some relational facts involving numbers also appear to be concrete (or, at any rate, eligible to enter into causal relations). The fact that the number of bangs = 3 could be causally explained by the fact that a single explosion occurred in an echo-producing cavity, or that the number of explosions = 3. If relations to abstracta like numbers don't prevent a fact from being concrete, why can't the fact that I am related to yellowness be concrete? Papineau insists that it isn't, but he gives no argument.

Here's a related point, which I will mention but not defend: deciding between theories by wielding an abstract principle about causation almost always fails, either because it is unclear that the principle excludes any theory, or else because it is unclear that the principle is true.

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## 2. Transparency

On Papineau's view, seeming to see a yellow ball amounts to instantiating an "intrinsic qualitative property" which does not in any way point towards the subject's environment. When I see a yellow ball in good light, on Papineau's view I am instantiating the intrinsic property *seeming to see a yellow ball*. That is where my conscious experience ends. The ball and the colour yellow have nothing to do with it. How can that be right? To amend a frequently reproduced quotation from Harman (58):

> When you see a [yellow ball], you do not experience any features as intrinsic features of [yourself]. Look at a [yellow ball] and try to turn your attention to intrinsic features of [yourself]. I predict you will find that the only features there to turn your attention to will be features of the presented [ball]…

There are two claims in this passage. First, when I see a yellow ball I can attend to its features—its colour, shape, texture, and so on. (To that list we can add the ball itself.) Second, when I see a yellow ball I can't attend to any intrinsic features of myself, for instance *seeming to see a yellow ball*. (The actual quotation from Harman has "intrinsic features of your experience.")

This is not to deny that I instantiate the property *seeming to see a yellow ball*. It is not even to deny that this property is intrinsic, or that I can know that I have it. But I'm not aware of it and I can't attend to it, as I am aware of the ball and its features, and can attend to them. That property of myself is curiously elusive. If I know that I seem to see a yellow ball, it is somehow *by* being aware of, or attending to, my environment.[4]

Papineau's response to this piece of phenomenology is not to write it off entirely. The Harmanesque passage contains an important truth, namely that the attempt to attend to one's experience (or oneself) does not reveal the internal realm that we usually ignore. The attempt does *something*: it might "induce heightened contrasts," for example (119). But sensory attention only sharpens what we are sensorily aware of anyway. Harman's mistake is to think these include "features of the presented ball":

> I don't accept that any worldly properties are 'present in' experience to start with. Sensory experience is constituted entirely by intrinsic

[4] See 121–5, an interesting discussion that deserves to be treated at length.

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> qualitative properties. It's all paint. So of course, when we try to shift our introspective focus from worldly to qualitative properties, we fail. After all, as I see it, there's nothing except intrinsic qualitative properties to focus on. Our inability to shift focus does not show that we can't introspect qualia. It just shows that there's nothing else in experience to introspect. (118)

Suppose I see a yellow ball. I turn my attention to (what I naïvely take to be) the colour of the ball. Then, unbeknownst to me, God intervenes, vaporizing the ball but keeping my visual system in the same state. We may suppose that I notice no change: "Still attending to the colour of the ball!," I report.

I think Papineau would agree that there is a single feature that occupies my attention throughout this process. Let us call that feature *yellow†*. The ball is not yellow†, because I am sensorily aware of that feature after the ball has been destroyed, and on Papineau's view I am not aware of uninstantiated properties. Something must be yellow†, but what? It can't be a sense datum, because Papineau has no truck with such things (28–30). An obvious candidate is myself: *I* am yellow†.

Let us run with that idea. By the same token, since I see the spherical ball, I am spherical†. I am also orange†, since I see an orange ball next to the yellow one. Can I really be yellow† *and* orange†? Naïvely, I would take these two properties to exclude each other.

These "daggered" properties of myself appear to be the same as Papineau's "starred" properties.

> . . . *yellow*$^\star$ [is] the property present in experience that represents worldly *yellow*, and *round*$^\star$ the experiential property that represents *round*. In my view, *yellow*$^\star$ and *round*$^\star$ are quite distinct from, and only contingently related to, *yellow* and *round* After all, it is central to my view that, in cases of illusion and hallucination, the former starred mental properties are instantiated, even though nothing nearby instantiates the unstarred worldly properties. When I misperceive a ball to [be] yellow, I instantiate the mental *yellow*$^\star$ property all right, but nothing in the vicinity, and certainly not my mental state, instantiates *yellow*. (115)

I will assume that yellow† = yellow$^\star$. The extra notation is useful because this equation may not be correct. A naïve perceiver would take yellow† to be a property of external objects, not herself. Indeed, I would think that a naïve perceiver would take yellow†ness to be *yellowness*, but I doubt that

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Papineau wants to commit himself to this kind of error theory. On the other hand, he does say:

> I do not dispute that sensory experience has a rich and distinctive introspectable structure. Nor do I dispute that this structure makes it extremely natural to think of sensory experience as intrinsically pointing to a world beyond. But from my point of view this intrinsic directedness is a kind of illusion. (75)

What is Papineau's explanation of this "illusion"? Why would the "structure" of what are in fact intrinsic non-representational properties of myself make me think of experience as pointing to "a world beyond"?[5] But let us pass over that and focus on another issue.

If I see a banana, and then see a lemon, and finally a yellow ball, I instantiate yellow★ on each occasion. If I see a banana next to a lemon, I also instantiate yellow★. In this case, my experience represents a yellow curved object to my left, and another yellow ovoid object to my right. But there's only *one* relevant property present in experience, namely yellow★. I can't instantiate it twice over! How do *two* yellow objects get into the picture?

A section called "Quasi-Objects and Their Quasi-Properties" suggests that there is an "element of my experience" that represents the yellow banana, and another that represents the yellow lemon (95). But what does this mean? I am yellow★, and curved★, and ovoid★, but what we apparently want are *two* objects, one yellow★ and curved★, the other yellow★ and ovoid★. Papineau invokes an analogy with "clusters of visible properties moving around [a television] screen and standing in various visible relations to other such clusters" (94), but I don't see that he is entitled to it. The analogy fits with the rejected sense datum theory, on which there are two objects, representing the banana and the lemon respectively. Papineau only has one.[6]

[5] Papineau appeals to Farkas 2013 at this point (see 91–3, 108–9). As Papineau puts the basic idea, it is the "relative coherence of certain elements of experience" that explains why "we intuitively think of certain experiences, but not others, as relating us to mind-independent aspects of the world" (92, 91). Here's one worry with this explanation. Why would this "relative coherence" make us think that sensory experience *intrinsically* (i.e. non-contingently) points to the world beyond? The relative coherence of a series of messages in Morse code might make us think that they point to the world beyond, but not intrinsically.

[6] For the suggestion that Papineau could take "populations of neurons" to be the bearers of the starred properties, see Pautz 2021: 84–90.

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## 3. Colour Similarity

Papineau endorses the argument from similarity against the identification of colours with physical properties of objects (say, reflectances):

> Physically speaking, blue and green go together and are unlike purple. In particular, the reflectance profiles of blue surfaces closely match those of green surfaces but are markedly different from those of purple surfaces.
>
> At the level of conscious colour experiences, though, blue goes with purple, not with green. Experiences of blue surfaces are much more like those of purple surfaces that those of green surfaces. This argues that the conscious character of colour experiences is determined, not by subjects' relation to worldly surface properties like reflectance profiles . . . but rather by intrinsic properties of subjects. (20)

Since Papineau is a physicalist, and thinks that the "conscious character of colour experiences"—blue★, green★, and so on—has to be instantiated, he is committed to finding colour similarities mirrored "physically speaking" *in subjects*. Imagine an alien scientist with alien perceptual modalities, examining the intrinsic physical properties of human subjects when they are exposed to a variety of stimuli that differentially reflect light in a narrow band of wavelengths. The alien would notice that these intrinsic physical properties stand in various similarity relations, and in fact these "physical" similarities would perfectly recreate colour similarities. In particular, the alien would classify some of these physical properties as "unique," and others as "binary," recreating the unique/binary distinction between the hues.

Good luck with that.[7] More importantly, the argument from similarity is dubious in the first place. The problem is that similarity is always similarity *in a respect*. If we make that explicit, then the premises of the argument from similarity can be put this way:

P1. Blue is more similar to purple than it is to green in chromatic respects.

[7] See Mollon 2009. As Papineau notes, other modalities need to be treated in a similar fashion. On pain, for example, see Hilbert and Klein 2014: fn. 3, 301, and Pautz 2014: fn. 4, 312–13. One particularly mystifying problem concerns *dissimilarities* between modalities. If the experienced similarities between colours, and between sounds, are to be explained in terms of the similarities in physical respects between "patterns of neural activation" (21), then colours and sounds should be experienced as *more* similar than we actually experience them. Two different patterns of neural activation are still *patterns of neural activation*, rather than patterns in the weather or in galaxies. On Papineau's view, seeing red should literally be like hearing a trumpet.

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P2. Reflectance$^{B}$ is not more similar to reflectance$^{P}$ than it is to reflectance$^{G}$ in physical/optical respects.

From these premises nothing exciting follows. In particular, P1 and P2 are compatible with an identity theory: blue=reflectance$^{B}$, and so on. (See Davies 2014; Byrne and Hilbert 2020.)

There is much more to be said, but I'll leave it there. That there is much more to be said is a testament to the importance of *The Metaphysics of Sensory Experience*.[8]

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[8] Many thanks to E. J. Green and David Hilbert.

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