

Some Thoughts About Thinking About Consciousness

DIANA RAFFMAN
University of Toronto

David Papineau's *Thinking About Consciousness* tells a skillful, inventive, and plausible story about why, given that the phenomenal character of conscious experience is an unproblematically physical property, we continue to suffer from "intuitions of dualism". According to Papineau, we are misled by the peculiar structure of the *phenomenal concepts* we use to introspect upon that phenomenal character. Roughly: unlike physical concepts, phenomenal concepts exemplify the kind of experience they are concepts of; and this creates the mistaken impression that the physical concepts leave something out. I find much of Papineau's account congenial, though I have some questions about his characterization of phenomenal concepts. I will take up two of these questions here.

On Papineau's view, phenomenal concepts are mental terms that are formed by concatenating an *experience operator*, namely 'the experience: —', together with "an actual state of... perceptual classification" (115). The latter state, itself an experience, fills the blank in the experience operator; and the concept thus formed refers to the type of experience whose instances are relevantly similar to that perceptual filling.¹ Papineau writes:

[P]henomenal concepts are compound terms, formed by entering some state of perceptual classification...into the frame provided by a general experience operator 'the experience: —'. For example, we might apply this experience operator to a state of visually classifying something as red...and thereby form a term which refers to the phenomenal experience of seeing something red. Such terms will have a sort of self-referential structure. Very roughly speaking, we refer to a certain experience by producing an example of it. (116)

¹ Actually Papineau discusses several different uses of phenomenal concepts, distinguishing in particular between *introspective* uses, where the blank in the experience operator is filled by a state of perceptual classification, and *imaginative* uses, where the blank in the experience operator is filled by a state of perceptual "re-creation". For simplicity, I will discuss only the introspective use of phenomenal concepts.

The use of phenomenal concepts affords us introspective awareness of the phenomenal characters of our experiences, in thoughts of the form (e.g.) ‘I am now having an instance of the experience: —’.

What I want to focus on first is the idea that phenomenal concepts, specifically their perceptual fillings, are *classifying* representations. Discussing Frank Jackson’s Mary, Papineau writes that when she first sees something red, her new introspective knowledge

isn’t just a matter of...having had the experience itself. It is something that remains with Mary after the experience is over (52)...Mary’s new experience will enable her henceforth to... *classify* new experiences *introspectively* as of the same kind. This is the most natural way of reading the expression ‘coming to know what something is like’ (53)...We can think of Mary as acquiring a new classificatory category (57).

The idea seems to be that when she first sees something red, Mary forms a new, phenomenal concept of red experience which she then uses in introspection. For example, during a current red experience she may think to herself ‘I am now having the experience: —’, or, making the indexical and classifying elements explicit, ‘I am now having an instance of *this* type of experience: —’. An actual state, an exemplar, of red experience fills the blank in the experience operator; and the resulting whole constitutes Mary’s introspective knowledge of the phenomenal character of her current red experience. The classificatory nature of her phenomenal concept is what makes Mary’s introspective state one of *knowledge*, of knowing what red experience is like, as opposed to one of merely having *had* a red experience. It is what allows Mary finally to “grasp...the *redness* of red experience” (53).

I think Papineau is right to conceive phenomenal concepts, *qua* concepts, as classifying representations. However, it seems to follow that Mary cannot acquire a phenomenal concept for every type of conscious experience she has. Given the limited nature of perceptual memory, we consciously experience more perceptual values than we can (learn to) classify or type-identify on inspection; in the terminology of perceptual psychology and psychophysics, we can consciously discriminate, i.e., reliably tell apart in a context of simultaneous or immediately successive presentation, more stimulus values than we can absolutely identify. In particular (and with a very small number of exceptions I’ll mention shortly), we cannot identify the finest-grained, most determinate values we experience.² So, for example, Mary cannot undergo a state of perceptual classification of the particular determinate shade of red she sees (call it ‘red₃₁’) upon her release from the achromatic room. Hence she cannot acquire a phenomenal concept of red₃₁ experience, and will not be able “henceforth to... classify new experiences introspectively as of the same

² In “On the Persistence of Phenomenology” (in Thomas Metzinger [ed.] *Conscious Experience* [Schöningh Verlag, 1995]), I defend this claim and elaborate its scientific basis.

kind". We may suppose that she can form a phenomenal concept of red experience (because she can form a classifying representation of red), and probably also concepts of, say, scarlet experience and experiences of some finer-grained hue categories within the category *scarlet*. But she cannot form such concepts for her experiences of the finest shades she can discriminate, like red₃₁. It seems to follow then, on Papineau's view, that when Mary has a red₃₁ experience, she can be introspectively aware of red phenomenal character but not of red₃₁ phenomenal character. Her experience has red₃₁ phenomenal character, she cannot introspect that.

Such a result seems problematic in at least three respects. First, it is counterintuitive: it certainly *seems* to me that I can introspect upon the determinate shade phenomenal characters of my experiences. Second, if Mary cannot introspect upon the determinate shade phenomenal characters of her experiences, it is hard to see how or why she should be able to report, for example when comparing two just noticeably different shades red₃₁ and red₃₂, that her current experiences of the two shades are phenomenally different. Since she can judge that the shades themselves are different, presumably she can make the corresponding introspective judgment about her experiences thereof.

Perhaps Papineau would deny that Mary experiences particular determinate shades, i.e., deny that her experiences have determinate shade phenomenal characters. For example, perhaps she experiences only shade *differences*. (To avoid confusion I will express this proposal by saying that Mary experiences only *hue differences*, or *differences in hue*.) I have discussed elsewhere (1995) some difficulties with this type of reply and so will mention only one problem here. As it turns out, there are several determinate hues (shades) that we *can* remember and recognize on inspection. Specifically, we can recognize the four *unique* hues—*viz.*, pure red containing no blue or yellow, pure yellow containing no red or green, pure green containing no blue or yellow, and pure blue containing no red or green. In psychological tests to determine the spectral locations of these unique hues, subjects adjust the relative percentages of different colored lights in an isolated light stimulus until they locate a pure instance of a given target hue.³ While making their adjustments, subjects often say things like "There it is, now I've got it, that's a perfect yellow" or "No, that blue still has a little green in it, let me try again", and so forth.

Given this behavioral evidence, it seems to me that a plausible theory of mind should say that these subjects are consciously experiencing particular determinate hues (shades). Subjects' behavior is our best guide to the character of their experience, and where unique red, yellow, blue, and green are concerned, they are behaving as if they are experiencing particular determinate

³ See e.g. Hurvich, Jameson, and Cohen 1968, and also Hardin 1988, p. 39 and pp. 79-80.

hues—not merely hue differences. Maybe Papineau would grant that our experiences of the unique hues have determinate phenomenal characters, but only because we have perceptual concepts of those hues: we have a concept of a red containing no blue or yellow, a concept of a yellow containing no red or green, and so forth. (Indeed, given that we appear to have such concepts, it is hard to see how Papineau could deny that our experiences of the unique hues are determinate.) This would still allow that our experiences of non-unique hues, for which we have no perceptual concepts, lack determinate phenomenal characters. The trouble with the latter reply, though, is that our experiences of the unique hues (shades) do not seem to differ in this way from our experiences of non-unique hues. A glance at the full spectrum of hues shows that they appear uniform in respect of anything that could be called 'determinate-ness'; for example, the unique hues do not appear to stand out from the rest of the spectrum, are not perceptually more salient, in the way one might expect if they looked more determinate. The spectrum appears largely continuous, and any discontinuities that do appear lie near category boundaries rather than central cases. Hence if our experiences of the unique hues have determinate phenomenal characters, so must our experiences of non-unique hues. As Michael Tye (devoted materialist) observes: “there is something it is like for me to experience [red₃₁], something that is different from what it is like to experience the other shades of red”.⁴ If that is right, then (at least some of) our experiences have phenomenal characters for which we have no corresponding phenomenal concepts.

Third, and perhaps most significant, red₃₁ phenomenal character may after all be the only (hue-related) phenomenal character that Mary’s experience can have. In general, determinate shade phenomenal characters may be the only phenomenal characters our color experiences can have. Consider that phenomenal characters are supposed to be individuated as finely as the properties we consciously experience; for example, our experiences of discriminably different shades of red are supposed to instantiate correspondingly different phenomenal characters. In contrast, there may be no phenomenal character corresponding to red *simpliciter*. After all, we never experience red *simpliciter*, because no object ever instantiates red *simpliciter*: objects instantiate red, and we visually experience red, only because they instantiate, and we experience, particular determinate shades of red. (*Simile* scarlet.) Consequently, whatever its true nature, the concept of red experience that Mary may acquire upon her release from the achromatic room is not a phenomenal concept as defined by Papineau; in other words, it is not a concept of a phenomenal character. Papineau writes that when “Mary experiences red, she becomes acquainted with the characteristic phenomenal feature of red experiences...[the] characteristic phenomenal feel of red experiences” (57). I am

⁴ *Ten Problems of Consciousness* (MIT Press, 1995), p. 66.

suggesting that there is no characteristic phenomenal feel of red experiences. If that is right, then given also her lack of a phenomenal concept of red₃₁, Mary will be unable to introspect upon the (hue-related) phenomenal character of her experience at all.

Now I want to set aside the matter of these possible limitations on Mary's conceptual repertoire and suppose that she has, at the least, a phenomenal concept of red experience. Still it is not yet clear to me how Papineau's view accounts for Mary's introspective knowledge of the phenomenal character of a current red experience. This brings me to my second question, which concerns Papineau's claim that phenomenal concepts refer to phenomenal characters directly, "without mediation of any further properties" (104). I am not certain that I fully understand this claim; but insofar as I do understand it, I don't yet see how it accounts for Mary's introspective awareness of the particular phenomenal character of her current red experience, i.e., her awareness of *which* phenomenal character her current experience has.

Perhaps the clearest way to get at the problem is to consider how Papineau's view handles the fact that when (e.g.) Mary sees two apples side by side, one red and the other green, her red experience is introspectively different from her green experience. That is, the phenomenal character she is introspectively aware of in her red experience is different from the phenomenal character she is introspectively aware of in her green experience. (We are also supposing that if queried, Mary could report that the two experiences are phenomenally different.) On Papineau's view, Mary's introspective awareness of the phenomenal character of her current red experience consists in her thinking 'I am now having an instance of *this* type of experience: —', where the blank is filled by a state of red perceptual classification. Her introspective awareness of the phenomenal character of her current green experience also consists in a thought 'I am now having an instance of *this* type of experience: —', but here the blank is filled by a state of green perceptual classification. It would seem then that if her current red and green experiences are to be introspectively different, the difference must have its source in the phenomenal difference between the two perceptual classifications (themselves experiences) that fill the blanks in her experience operators. In general, the phenomenal character of the filling state must be what affords introspective awareness of the phenomenal character of a current experience—that is, introspective awareness of *which* phenomenal character the current experience has. But how exactly is this supposed to work?

Perhaps the idea is that the two perceptual filling states make Mary's current red and green experiences introspectively different by representing the corresponding types of experience (red and green) under different modes of presentation. And perhaps the two filling states represent their respective experience types under different modes of presentation by virtue of *exemplify-*

ing the different phenomenal characters had by tokens of those experience types. But now this view begins to sound a lot like another recent account—explicitly rejected by Papineau—according to which the phenomenal characters of our experiences “provide their own Fregean modes of presentation”⁵ Papineau writes:

The idea we are working with is that phenomenal concepts refer to phenomenal properties directly, without mediation of any further properties. It would seem badly to misrepresent this idea to say that phenomenal properties provide their own Fregean modes of presentation. This suggests a picture whereby the mind somehow already has the power to think about some phenomenal property, $_x$, and then uses this ability to form a mode of presenting that property (‘the property which is property $_x$ ’, perhaps). But this makes little sense. If we already have the ability to think about the phenomenal property $_x$, we don’t need to construct some further mode of presentation to enable us to think about it. There is only one property in play when a phenomenal concept refers to a phenomenal property: namely, the phenomenal property itself...(104-5).

I will suggest that unless Mary has available some avenue of introspective access to the phenomenal characters of her experiences (whether involving Fregean modes of presentation or otherwise) over and above the “direct” access afforded by her phenomenal concepts as characterized by Papineau, her red and green experiences will be introspectively identical. We can see why by considering some of the ways in which Papineau might propose to avoid this unwelcome result.

Perhaps Papineau supposes that Mary’s current red and green experiences are introspectively different simply in virtue of the fact that she instantiates phenomenally different filling states in the corresponding experience operators. More explicitly, maybe the two current experiences are introspectively different because in introspecting upon them, Mary actually instantiates the corresponding experience types, and the latter experiences (instances) are phenomenally different. This proposal runs into difficulty, though, for as Papineau will surely agree, merely instantiating phenomenally different experience types—even perceptually classifying experience types—is not sufficient to make those experiences (instances), or any other (relevantly similar) experiences, *introspectively* different; indeed, it’s not sufficient to make any experiences introspectible at all. Generally speaking, instantiating a (first-order) mental state is not sufficient for introspective awareness of it or of any other state. Thus it is hard to see how Mary’s mere instantiation of two phenomenally different perceptual filling states could suffice to make her current red and green experiences introspectively different.

⁵ See for example Brian Loar, “Should the Explanatory Gap Perplex Us?”, in T. Rockmore (ed.), *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, 2 (Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999).

Maybe Papineau would reply that what makes her current experiences introspectively different is her instantiation of the phenomenally different filling states *together with* the adjoining of the experience operators. But if instantiation of the filling states is not by itself sufficient for introspective difference, it is hard to see how the addition of the two experience operators, which are identical, could solve the problem. In addition, we would need to hear more about how the operation of adjoining the experience operators could produce an introspective difference: how does a mere (mental) concatenation produce introspective awareness?

Alternatively, perhaps Papineau supposes that the classifying nature of the perceptual filling states is what makes Mary's current red and green experiences introspectively different. Consider for example the following remarks (concerning the incorrigibility of introspective access):

Suppose I hear something as middle C (or see something as red, or see something as an elephant,...). Then I can use this current state of perceptual classification both to form a subject term which names this *particular* experience and to form a predicate term for this *type* of experience...Now suppose that I use these terms to characterize such a current perceptual state as being of the relevant type. I judge that: *this particular experience is an instance of this type of experience*. Here there does indeed seem to be no possibility of error. I can't go wrong when I judge in this way that: *this* experience is an instance of hearing middle C, or this experience is seeing something red, or seeing an elephant. (134-5)

Here the idea seems to be that when Mary thinks to herself 'I am now having an instance of *this* type of experience: —', that just is a way of thinking 'I am now having an instance of red experience', or 'I am now having an instance of green experience'. So perhaps Papineau will argue that her current red and green experiences are introspectively different on this ground. In general, the claim would be that Mary is introspectively aware of the phenomenal character of her current experience, aware of which phenomenal character her current experience has, in virtue of thinking to herself that she is now having an instance of (e.g.) red experience. However, this proposal may simply relocate the problem, for the latter thought seems to come to the same as Mary's thinking that her current experience has the phenomenal character that red experience has. It leaves unexplained how she knows, in the sense of being introspectively aware, *which* phenomenal character red experience has.

Interestingly, Papineau characterizes indexical reference in general in the following way:

[I]ndexical terms always involve a demonstrative element...plus a descriptive element...The compound indexical term ('that animal')...refers to the unique entity, if there is one such, that both lies in the 'direction' indicated by the demonstrative element and satisfies the descriptive term. (65)

Papineau appears to overlook a third element of indexical reference—what might be called the ‘independent access’ element. Roughly, in order for a given use of an indexical term to refer *in the sense that its reference can be grasped by a competent hearer*, the hearer must have some form of independent access to the referent. For example, in order for my utterance of ‘that animal’ (pointing to an animal in the field before me) to be properly understood by a hearer, the hearer must be able to *see* the animal, and *see* that it lies in the direction I have indicated. In other words, he must have some independent (here, visual) access to the animal. Otherwise, the animal will meet the requirements Papineau specifies—it will lie in the indicated direction and satisfy the description ‘animal’—but my reference to it will not be grasped because the hearer cannot see it.

Papineau’s characterization of public indexical reference is telling, I think, because his account of introspective indexical reference seems to commit a similar (not exactly analogous) oversight. It seems to overlook the fact that in order for Mary’s current red and green experiences to be introspectively different, she needs some mode of introspective access to those experiences over and above her (mere) instantiation of the relevant filling states and adjoined indexical experience operators. In general, for Mary to gain introspective access to the phenomenal character of a current experience, she needs some mode of introspective access over and above instantiating the relevant filling state and adjoining an experience operator. (This *may* be to say that in order for Mary to gain introspective access to the phenomenal character of her current experience, her phenomenal concept of that type of experience cannot refer to that phenomenal character *directly* as Papineau maintains.) Without some such independent access, introspection is left rather in the predicament of the hearer who sees me pointing in a certain direction, while saying ‘that animal’, but cannot see what I am pointing at.