

Papineau on Phenomenal Concepts

TIM CRANE
University College London

Over the past decade or so, David Papineau has given an account of the content and motivation of a physicalist conception of the world with more thoroughness and argumentative defence than many physicalists have thought necessary. In doing this, he has substantially advanced the debate on physicalism, and physicalists and non-physicalists alike should be grateful to him.¹ At the heart of Papineau's defence of physicalism in his recent book (2002) is his theory of phenomenal concepts. Like many physicalists, Papineau diagnoses the apparent threats to physicalism posed by the phenomena of consciousness by locating the source of anti-physicalist intuitions in features of our thinking rather than in non-physical features of reality. But what is new in *Thinking About Consciousness* is his detailed account of *which* features of our thinking it is that generate these supposedly confused anti-physicalist arguments. Hence the bulk of the book is an attempt to show that the most famous 'consciousness-based' anti-physicalist arguments—the knowledge argument, the zombie argument and the explanatory gap argument—rest on a mistaken understanding of certain kinds of concepts: phenomenal concepts.

I agree with Papineau that physicalism (properly understood) should not be troubled by the knowledge argument and the explanatory gap argument, and that some other anti-physicalist arguments seem to move from assumptions about ways of thinking to conclusions about reality. But I doubt whether his theory of phenomenal concepts can help his defence of physicalism and his diagnosis of the errors of dualism. My reason for saying this is that I do not think there are any such concepts. In saying this I do not mean to deny that there is a useful distinction to be made between scientific concepts, the mastery of which requires knowledge of a certain amount of theory, and concepts which are acquired on the basis of experience, which can be called 'phenomenal' concepts. Many areas of philosophy will need some such

¹ If I may be permitted a personal footnote: my own understanding of why anyone would want to be a physicalist at all has been deeply influenced by reading David's work and from many valuable discussions with him over the years. I am grateful for this further opportunity to respond to David's stimulating views.

distinction, I think, however it may be drawn in detail. What I deny is that there are any phenomenal concepts in Papineau's sense.

The essence of Papineau's theory of phenomenal concepts is that they 'recreate', 'simulate', or otherwise 'involve' their referents. (Although Papineau does not always make this explicit, he must be talking about *episodes* in which such concepts are exercised, rather than the concepts themselves.) Papineau distinguishes two ways in which phenomenal concepts can be employed: in introspection and in imagination (2002: 116-22). When one is employing a phenomenal concept of pain in introspecting a pain, the pain is a constituent of the act of introspection; but also, when thinking about the pain after it has occurred, say in imagining it or remembering it, the pain (or something like it) is also involved in the experience, as (something like) a constituent. Papineau then uses this idea to explain why it is that many philosophers have an intuition that mental and physical states are distinct (the 'intuition of distinctness': 2002: 6-7). His explanation is that when philosophers think about conscious states, they typically employ phenomenal concepts. These concepts, according to the physicalist, refer to the same physical states as 'material' or scientific concepts. But because uses of phenomenal concepts involve these states themselves, and material concepts do not, then it can appear that they cannot both refer to the same state. So it seems that mental and physical states must be distinct. But this kind of reasoning is fallacious—Papineau calls it the 'antipathetic fallacy' (2002:171-4)—since for a physicalist, the distinctness is between the concepts, not the referents of the concepts. The illusion of distinctness is created by the fact that phenomenal and material *concepts* are so different. But once we have recognised what this real difference between the concepts consists in, we can see that this fact is not incompatible with physicalism.

It is debatable, but I think very plausible, to say that there are some concepts which one can only have when one has had certain kinds of experience. However, it seems to me entirely incredible that when one thinks about, say, pain, one must, as a necessary part of that very act of thinking, have an experience which *in any way* resembles pain. When the narrator of E.M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* says that 'physical pain is almost too terrible to bear', he is clearly intending to talk about pain in the phenomenal sense, pain as a feeling, an event in the stream of consciousness. In any normal sense of 'phenomenal', then—any sense that relates it to its etymology and its traditional philosophical meaning—he is employing the phenomenal concept of pain. But in order to understand this remark, and therefore grasp the concepts which it expresses, I do not think I need to undergo, as a part of that very understanding, an experience which is in any sense painful. Yet this is what Papineau seems to be saying. In this note, I will attempt to justify my scepticism about this remarkable view.

To begin with, we should note that what is important for Papineau's theory is his account of the *imaginative* use of phenomenal concepts. If his theory of the imaginative uses of phenomenal concepts fails, then his whole theory fails. Unfortunately, Papineau himself is not always entirely clear about this. At the end of chapter 6 of *Thinking about Consciousness*, Papineau considers a version of the scepticism I have just raised about whether exercises of concepts must 'resemble their referents' (as he puts it) and offers two responses. His first response is as follows:

even if *imaginative* uses of phenomenal concepts do not resemble the experiences imagined, these are not the *only* uses of phenomenal concepts. There are also *introspective* uses of phenomenal concepts. ... I take it to be uncontroversial that *these* uses of phenomenal concepts resemble the experiences they refer to... Given that this referential act includes the pain, it will feel like a pain. (2002:172)

His second response is to say that the issue is whether 'normal people *take* there to be a resemblance between imaginative uses of phenomenal concepts and conscious feelings'. For if they do, then 'this will push them towards the antipathetic fallacy'. Papineau claims that it is a 'common, everyday thought that imaginative uses [of phenomenal concepts] resemble the experiences imagined, even if it possible to raise philosophical doubts about such resemblances' (2002: 173). He claims that this is enough to diagnose the fallacious reasoning in the arguments against physicalism. I will ignore this second response here. Since I have no idea whether the claim Papineau makes about normal people is true, and he himself provides no evidence for it, the point will have to be left for another occasion.

In any case, the first response fails. Papineau is right that it is uncontroversial that an introspective exercise of a phenomenal concept 'involves' the very property it refers to. But the reason for this is not the one he offers—i.e., that act of introspecting the pain is a 'vivid copy' of the pain, and therefore resembles the pain, and therefore feels like the pain. The introspective act is not a copy of a pain at all. It may be a representation of a pain, but not all representations are copies. It is entirely wrong to say that the introspective act *feels* like a pain, since this implies that there are two things which hurt: the pain and the introspective act.² But it is impossible to distinguish the pain one feels when *having* a pain from the pain one feels when *introspecting* it. And the obvious reason for this is that they are the same thing. Papineau surely misdescribes introspection: I don't want the referential act to go away, I want the pain to go away.

² It may be thought that this is an uncharitable interpretation. But Papineau explicitly puts it this way himself: 'Given that this referential act includes the pain, it will feel like a pain. *It* [i.e., the referential act] will hurt, and make me want *it* to go away' (2002:172; my emphasis).

The real reason his claim is uncontentious is that if someone introspects an experience, E, then E must exist at the time of the introspective act. Otherwise one could not introspect it. For it is surely true that if it seems to someone that they are having an experience, then they are having an experience of some kind—even if they make a mistake about how to classify it. The principle I am assuming here is not a principle about the infallibility of our powers of discrimination, but only this: *that anything which seems like an experience is an experience of some kind*. In this sense, thinking about an experience—introspectively exercising a phenomenal concept—must ‘involve’ the experience, whatever it exactly is, since it implies its existence at the moment when one is thinking of it. There can be no objection, then, to treating the entire introspective event as a complex event containing the act of introspection itself and the introspected experience. Papineau’s thesis applied to introspective uses of phenomenal concepts is not just uncontentious, it is close to a truism.

For a simple illustration, return to the case of pain. We can assume here for the sake of argument that whenever someone thinks they are in pain, they are in pain. (Of course, this principle has been questioned, but nothing turns on this here.) It follows that if I introspectively judge that I am in pain, exercising the phenomenal concept *pain*, what I think is true: I am in pain. There can be no objection, then, to treating the pain itself as a *constituent* of the episode of introspection, just as one might treat the introspection of a conscious thought as containing that thought itself. This is why I say that Papineau’s account of the introspective use of phenomenal concepts is an unexceptional thesis, which should be accepted by everyone who holds that when one thinks one is having an experience, one is having an experience. (There are difficult questions about self-knowledge and the classification of experiences which arise here, but they do not need to be addressed in this context.)

If Papineau allows himself only to appeal to the introspective uses of phenomenal concepts, then his explanation of the intuition of distinctness will fail. For there is absolutely no reason to suppose that those who have this intuition only have it when they are *introspecting* their experiences. Someone could clearly and distinctly conceive that the pain they had last week was something distinct from any brain state; in having this intuition, the intuition which Papineau is so keen to diagnose away, they are employing the phenomenal concept of pain in the imaginative way. So it is his *imaginative* uses of phenomenal concepts which provide the problem—the intuition of distinctness—just as much as the introspective uses. For this reason, the unexceptional idea that *introspective* uses of phenomenal concepts involve their referents is toothless in the defence of physicalism.

So it is crucial for Papineau's theory that not just the introspective exercises of phenomenal concepts, but the imaginative exercises of them, involve their referents. So from now on I will focus simply on the imaginative exercises. For brevity, I will sometimes use the term 'phenomenal concepts' to mean 'imaginative exercises of phenomenal concepts'.

At some points in his book, Papineau says that phenomenal concepts *instantiate* the experiences they refer to (e.g., 'we refer to a certain experience by producing an example of it', 2002: 116; cf. also 105). Now he says this; but he cannot mean it literally. For Papineau also thinks that experiences are physical states, and that these states typically play certain causal roles (2002:102). Indeed, a description of these physical states in terms of the causal roles they play would express the *material* concept of the state, as opposed to the phenomenal concept (2002: 98). So, like most physicalists, Papineau thinks that when one has an experience, one is in a physical state which plays a certain causal role. Now if such physicalism were true, and phenomenal concepts really did instantiate the very types of experience they refer to, then the phenomenal concept of pain would instantiate the physical state of pain, playing its causal role. But this simply does not happen when one is thinking about pain in the imaginative, non-'material', non-scientific way. So it cannot be true that the phenomenal concept of pain instantiates the very property it is about.

Papineau actually concedes this point:

An imagined pain may not be unpleasant in just the same way as a real one, but it can still make you feel queasy, or make you twitch, or make the hairs on your neck stand on end. Again, imagining tasting chocolate feels akin to actually tasting chocolate. Even if it's not as nice, it can still make your mouth water. (2002: 174)

But if this is what Papineau thinks, then he should not express his view by saying that phenomenal concepts *instantiate* their referents. He should rather stick to the formulation which he chooses elsewhere in his book: that phenomenal concepts 'resemble' their referents:

When I think imaginatively about some earlier experience, like seeing red ... I won't actually have the experience of seeing red, but my experience is likely to bear some phenomenal similarity to the experience of seeing red—a 'faint copy' as Hume put it. (2002: 105)

Let us now consider, finally, this hypothesis: that phenomenal concepts involve an experience which is phenomenally similar to the experience referred to by the concept.

We should not confuse Papineau's thesis with another idea: that all imaginative episodes are sensory or experiential in character. In other words, all imagination involves having a quasi-sensory experience (seeing in the mind's eye, hearing in the mind's ear etc.). This may or may not be true, but it is a thesis about imagination, not about concepts. So it might help side-

step possible confusion to avoid the term ‘imaginative’ and rather use the neutral term, ‘non-introspective’. After all, phenomenal concepts have two uses, according to Papineau: imaginative and introspective. So we can replace ‘imaginative’ with ‘non-introspective’. We then arrive at this way of putting the thesis:

(P) Exercising a phenomenal concept in the non-introspective way always involves an experience which resembles the experience referred to by the concept.

Difficulties for this thesis emerge when we consider in some detail the apparent possibility that someone might forget or otherwise be unable to bring to mind what an experience feels like, and yet still think about it in a way that is non-scientific, non-‘material’ in Papineau’s sense, and obviously non-introspective. In other words, someone could employ a phenomenal concept non-introspectively, referring to an experience E, but not have any experience resembling E at the time of employing the concept. If there really are such cases, then thesis (P) is false.

It seems to me that there are many examples of this kind of thing. I think have the phenomenal concept of a diminished 7th chord. I can recognise the sound of this kind of chord when I hear it, I can tell you how it is constructed, and I can say some more or less precise phenomenal things about it—for example, about how the felt ‘tension’ of this chord, in the context of classical harmony, derives from the presence of the augmented fourth/diminished fifth interval. But although I can hum the arpeggio to myself, I am entirely unable to call to mind the sound of the chord as such. Another example: I think I have the phenomenal concept of a wine made from gewürztraminer grapes. I can recognise these wines when I taste them, and I can say various phenomenal things about them, for example, that they have a taste like lychees. But I am unable to bring this taste to mind now, as I think about gewürztraminer in this phenomenal way. Finally, return to the phenomenal concept of pain. Like many human beings, I think I am very bad at imagining and remembering pain. Hence my thoughts which employ the ordinary concept of pain have not normally been accompanied by anything resembling a feeling of pain. I have been very fortunate to have led a relatively pain-free life; but I do not think this inhibits me from employing the non-material, non-scientific concept of pain in imagination and conscious thought.

Notice three things about these examples. First, it is consistent with all these examples, as I have described them, that I would not possess the relevant phenomenal concepts—diminished 7th, gewürztraminer, and pain—if I had not had the experiences in question. So the dependence of phenomenal concepts on prior experience is not the issue. Second, it is consistent with

these examples that when I actually *can* imagine something, then the imagination has a sensory character. So, as noted above, the nature of imagination is not the issue. And third, these are truths about *my* experience, but even if they were not, it is incredible that truths of a similar kind could not be true of someone. For all that is required is a situation where a person could think in a non-introspective yet phenomenal way about certain sounds or tastes or other experiences, but be unable to recreate them in imagination. And not only does this seem very hard to deny, it is even harder to see why anyone would want to deny it.

Curiously, when discussing one physicalist response to Jackson's knowledge argument, Papineau allows that a very similar kind of case is possible. He says that someone might be able to 'think imaginatively about experience' but have 'forgotten how to locate any actual past experience of the requisite kind' and hence that the phenomenal concept of an experience cannot be identified with an indexical concept referring to a past experience (2002: 122). But Papineau does not see that it only takes a slight modification to this plausible example to create the problem cases I have described above. (Forgetting is only one way in which someone could fail to 'locate' an experience.)

If he admits that cases like this are possible, there seem to be only two ways for Papineau to respond. First, he could say that since any episode of conscious thinking is an experiential phenomenon in a broad sense of 'experiential', then *whatever* experience the subject is having when exercising the concept is the one which resembles, in one way or another, the referent of the phenomenal concept. But surely the only way in which conscious acts of thinking *must* resemble experiences is by being conscious, or experiential; and a resemblance this weak clearly will not do any work for Papineau in his diagnosis of the intuition of distinctness. What he actually says about the relevant kind of resemblance—that 'subjects be disposed to use these terms [concepts] and respond to such resembling instances in a uniform way' (2002:119)—does not help him, since as we saw above, subjects plainly do not respond to having pain and imagining pain in a uniform way.

Secondly, Papineau could respond that these uses of concepts that I have described are not uses of genuinely phenomenal concepts. But if he says this, then he leaves himself open to the charge that his thesis is a mere definition of a special sense of 'phenomenal concept', a sense which his opponents are not obliged to employ. Since in my examples, I am not employing scientific or 'material' concepts of diminished 7th, gewürztraminer, and pain, Papineau will have to accept a threefold division of concepts: material, phenomenal (in his sense) and the 'other kind'. And then his thesis will have no especial force against the anti-physicalist, who can simply say that they are using this 'other kind' of concept when they have their intuition of distinctness.

I agree with Papineau that the nature of the concepts we use to think about experience is a subject of interest in its own right (2002: 5). But I see no reason to believe that exercises of these phenomenal concepts must resemble the experiences they refer to *in any way at all*, except trivially (e.g., by being conscious or experiential in some way or another). Therefore, despite its neat attack on the intuition of distinctness, I reject Papineau's theory of phenomenal concepts. This is not because I want to defend the arguments against physicalism. It is simply because I have not been convinced there are any such concepts.

REFERENCE

Papineau, David (2002) *Thinking About Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).