

“Review of Michelle Montague’s *The Given: Experience and Its Contents*”

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The focus in this book is on *what* we experience, or, in the author’s terminology, what is given, and *how* we experience it.¹ She argues that we experience “not just colors, shapes, sounds, and feelings, but also physical objects (chairs, quarks), mathematical formulae, philosophical truths, time, space, fury, love, joy and hate” (235). And we do so either sensorily, cognitively, or evaluatively, which constitute the three proprietary types of phenomenology.

The book can be divided into two parts. The first part consists of chapters 1-4 which set out her general approach and discuss the claim that in experience we are not only aware of the above sorts of things, but also of the experience itself (“awareness of awareness”). Chapters 1 and 2 introduce how she thinks about phenomenology, consciousness, intentionality, and content. Chapter 3 discusses her view of awareness of awareness, contrasting it with Rosenthal’s higher-order theory, Kriegel’s same-order view, Husserlian non-relational views, and Thomasson’s adverbialist view. Finally, chapter 4 argues for her view by claiming that unlike standard representationalism and Naïve Realism, it can easily explain what she calls P. F. Strawson’s datum: the fact that we can easily tell apart our experience from what we experience.

The second part consists of chapters 5-9 which tell us what is given in different sorts of experiences and how it is given. Chapter 5 involves an intricate discussion of the sensory-perceptual experience of color. It argues that we first experience phenomenal redness, a property of experience itself, and only in virtue of it experience the naive redness attributed to objects (96). Chapter 6 and 7 discuss the perceptual experience of physical objects (more on

¹ Wilfrid Sellars used “the given” for something experiential and non-conceptual which is at the same time supposed to provide evidence or a reason for belief (Sellars 1956). He famously argued that the given is a myth in that nothing could do both. In contrast, Montague uses “the given” just to mean what experience is of and epistemological considerations play no role at all.

this below). Chapter 8 argues that conscious thought cannot be understood in terms of access-consciousness or sensory phenomenological accompaniments. Rather, it must be understood in terms of proprietary cognitive phenomenology characteristic of concept use. Finally, Chapter 9 argues that conscious emotion involves not only sensory and cognitive phenomenology, but also a distinctively evaluative phenomenology, which involves attributing properties like sadness to states of affairs like a friend's death.

This is an interesting and rich book which provides lots of opportunities for reflection about how to best describe experience, and how to think about particular types of experiences. There is a lot to agree with, but reviews being what they are, in what follows, I will first comment briefly on her use of 'intentionality' and 'content', and then make some critical remarks about her view of awareness of awareness and argument from P. F. Strawson's datum, and her claims about perceptual experience of objects.

Intentionality, Representation, Content. On a relatively standard usage, 'intentionality' is the property of being of or about something else. On the other hand, 'representation-as' is a slightly narrower property of having *content*, something that has correctness- or truth-conditions. On this usage, many mental states are plausibly intentional, but not representational. For example, when you think of the number 18, as you just did, your thought is intentional in being about 18, but doesn't by itself represent it as being any way. Only when you further predicate the property of being prime of it, do you also represent it as being prime. Your resulting judgment that 18 is prime has a propositional content which is true iff 18 is prime.

Montague agrees that not everything that is intentional is ipso facto representational. However, in contrast to the above usage, she divorces the notions of representation and content and content and correctness-conditions. On her usage, whatever the state is about or of, *is* its content (30). Thus, whatever we experience, counts as the experience's content.

It is important to be clear that despite some appearances to the contrary, these are simply different ways of using the terms and all the views can be stated in both terms (e. g. one could just restate everything she says by using 'given' and refrain from using 'content').

Awareness of Awareness, Transparency, and P. F. Strawson's Datum

There is a trivial sense in which everybody should agree that in experiencing we are aware of the experiences themselves. As Montague puts it: “experiences are experienced” (45). The disagreement is over how to best describe this and what to make of it. On higher-order views the awareness takes the form of a higher-order state, either a thought or a perception. Montague rejects this approach and proposes that awareness is a same-order reflexive relation, but a very special one like identity in not being able to hold between two distinct items (58). Since the Husserlians who deny that it is a relation only deny that it’s a perceptual or reference-relation, and she agrees, it’s unclear whether there is any real space between their views (62). All in all, the view seems plausible, but doesn’t seem to go much beyond an intuitive description of the phenomenon with slaps on the wrist to those who try to make it into something else (compare Burge 2006).

Given that what Montague says about awareness of awareness remains at this intuitive level (indeed, it is hard to see what more can be said), it makes one doubtful that she can get as much leverage out of this as she seems to want. In Chapter 4 she argues that her view is in “direct conflict” with the transparency thesis, the claim that in perceptual experience, we can only become aware of the qualities of the experienced objects, but not the qualities of the experiences themselves. But this is somewhat hard to believe. The transparentists surely don’t want to deny the trivial claim that experiences are experienced and an intuitive description of it. When they deny that we can become aware of qualities of experiences themselves, they seem to deny that we can *attend* or *introspect* them. But Montague is explicit about agreeing with this (72). So, it’s hard to find space for conflict.

A similar problem besets her argument from P. F. Strawson’s datum. Consider mere visual sensations like the ones you experience when you close your eyes or when you’re “seeing stars”. It is characteristic of them that they feature no sense of being confronted with anything apart from your own experience and they involve no temptation to distinguish between our experiences and what we experience (relatedly, they also don’t feel transparent). Contrast this with genuine perceptual experiences like seeing a red apple. The datum is that in the latter case we can easily distinguish between the seeing and what we see. Montague argues that

transparency-inspired views like standard representationalism and Naïve Realism can't capture this. Again, this is very hard to believe. She thinks that the datum must be captured in terms of awareness of awareness and that transparentists don't allow for it. But this is doubly problematic. As we saw above, in the relevant sense, they can allow for it. However, more importantly, I doubt that the datum can be captured by awareness of awareness in the first place. Notice that in the case of mere visual sensations we don't draw the relevant distinction, but the experiences involve awareness of awareness nevertheless! This suggests that what explains the datum in the case of genuine perceptual experiences is something that is only characteristic of them. And on a relatively common view, what does this is the *objectification* and the accompanying figure-ground separation, constancies, and completion that they feature since that is what generates the sense of being confronted with something that remains the same throughout changes in the flow of experience (e. g. Nöe 2004, Church 2013).

In sum, I doubt that her view of awareness of awareness can really do the work she wants it to do.

Perceptual Experience of Objects

As is clear from above, in the cases of genuine perceptual experience, we don't just perceive colors and shapes, but objects. Such experiences have not only sensory phenomenology characterized by the experience of sensory qualities, but also properly perceptual phenomenology characterized by objectification (for discussion of the differences see Reiland 2015). Montague agrees, but she argues that perceptual objectification is a matter of having a demonstrative thought with the form $\langle \textit{That thing}, F_{\text{ness}} \rangle$ and properly perceptual phenomenology is cognitive phenomenology (136). As far as I can see she provides no motivation for this controversial and widely discarded view. Adopting it puts her in the company of Thomas Reid and early 20th century sense-datum theorists who thought that object-perception is a matter of something like judgment, and opens her view to standard objections to such views (for discussion see Burge 2010, Firth 1965). Furthermore, there are several alternative options that are consistent with everything she cares about, but allow for properly perceptual phenomenology without concept use. First, she could understand objectification in terms of a pre-conceptual reference relation to objects much like Burge and

Pylyshyn (Burge 2010, Pylyshyn 2007). This would just amount to the claim that there is something pre-conceptual that functions in the relevant respect like the demonstrative thought she posits. Second, she could understand objectification in terms of imagination (Church 2013, Nanay 2010). It would have been nice to have a discussion of these alternatives and more motivation for the claim that objectification involves concept use.²

References

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