

Michelle Montague, *The Given: Experience and Its Content*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 250pp.
ISBN 978-0-19-874890-8

There are two central claims at the core of this book: first, that experience is as much about the world as it is about itself; and second, that since we engage with the world in different ways, accounting for what is given in experience calls for an account of these different ways as well.

The general argument, it seems to me, follows roughly four steps: 1. Traditional accounts of mental content fail to capture properly the phenomenological nature of what is given in experience. 2. Phenomenologically, what is given in experience (or the ‘total mental content’) has a twofold character: necessarily, it tells something about the world, but also about the experience itself. 3. By also relating to things and ordinary objects in the real world (and not just to sensory properties), this content requires a phenomenology other than the sensory phenomenology of, e.g., colors and sounds. Such a phenomenology – cognitive phenomenology – is also needed to account for our successful access to physical objects in perception and for what is given in our conscious thoughts. 4. Object perception and emotional attitudes are similar in at least one central respect: they are ‘object-positing’ experiences: in the former, we posit objects, and in the latter, we posit values. Here again, a distinct phenomenology – evaluative phenomenology – is needed to account for what is given in conscious emotions.

This argument is developed in detail over the nine chapters of the book. First, Montague discusses the traditional accounts of mental content and observes that most of them seem rather incomplete: mental content is more than merely representational content cashed out in terms of aboutness, conditions of satisfaction, or conditions of accuracy (chapter 1), although mental content (in her view) is representational by nature. What characterizes mental content primarily is not its aboutness, but the fact that it captures what is phenomenologically given. What characterizes the phenomenologically given is that it is not restricted to ‘phenomenological phenomena’ (38), e.g., what is visually given in a visual experience. When you look at a table from above, the backside of the table is not a ‘phenomenological phenomenon’, although it is part of what is phenomenologically given (this feature is dealt with in more detail later in the book). Furthermore, and more importantly at this stage, two ‘co-constituting’ elements are involved when something is phenomenologically given: a) the different phenomenological properties of the experience, e.g., the particular shade of the color of the table as given or instantiated in your experience and b) the kind of experience (e.g., a visual experience) you are having. They are co-constituting because there can’t be phenomenological properties of an experience unless these are properties of an experience of a certain kind, and there can’t be conscious experiences unless they are experiences of something. As Montague puts it: “One feature is not more basic or fundamental than the other; they are aspects of the same thing” (45), to which one could add: both features are representational in their own ways (chapters 2 and 3).

The idea of co-constitution means that, necessarily, we are always aware of our experiences when we have them. This is expressed in terms of the ‘awareness of awareness’ thesis discussed in chapters 2 and 3. An obvious objection to such a thesis is the transparency intuition, namely, that however hard I might pay attention to my experience, the only thing I can ‘see’ is what the experience is about (e.g., a table, a chair, or some blue spot). Montague’s answer to this objection is to bring in another intuition from P.F. Strawson, namely that ‘in everyday perception we naturally and unreflectively distinguish between our perceivings and the external objects of our

perceivings' (69), an intuition which matches optimally her conception of the phenomenologically given. If the two intuitions are equally plausible, then one should favor an account which can accommodate both. Disjunctivism and standard representationalism do account for the transparency intuition, but their accounts of Strawson's intuition face considerable difficulties, as Montague shows. Her account avoids such difficulties and can also accommodate the transparency intuition to some extent, insofar as she holds, together with most of the philosophers influenced by Brentano, that 'awareness of awareness' can never itself be made the focus of attention or be transformed into introspection (72).

Montague's discussion of Brentano throughout the book is highly stimulating. She succeeds in extracting the essence of Brentano's idea about mental content – namely, that it is twofold: about the object of one's attitude and about the attitude itself – and applying it in a theory according to which the total mental content is directed not merely towards 'phenomenological phenomena', but towards worldly objects themselves. Although this might be controversial for some, I believe that it is also in line with some of Brentano's most interesting views on perception.

Having established that the 'awareness of awareness' thesis can account for Strawson's intuition, Montague goes on in chapter 5 to argue that the thesis can also account for certain property attributions made in visual experiences in a better way than most of its competitors, such as standard representationalism, Fregeanism, and Chalmers's elaboration of Fregeanism. To understand this, we have to go back to the thesis mentioned above: that what characterizes the phenomenologically given is that it is not necessarily a 'phenomenological phenomenon'. When I see this red chair, I experience phenomenological properties, that is, the properties of something within my seeing. At the same time, however, Montague stresses, the redness in my experience seems also to be a property of the chair: it is an experience *of* the chair. Hence, it seems reasonable to say that phenomenological properties are about my experience as much as they are about the world. What is phenomenologically given, in Montague's sense, is then twofold: my experience and the world. When I see this red chair, I become aware of my seeing by the simple fact that the 'visual quality' of the experience (e.g., the particular angle from which I see the chair, the shades of red that I perceive, etc.) is part of the total content of the experience: it is representational in this sense in virtue of being self-representational. And I see the chair as an object of some kind in virtue of property attributions, such as being something to sit on. Any conscious experience, Montague seems to suggest, is representational in virtue of being co-constituted by the self-representational nature of the experience (which makes it a *conscious* experience) and by property attributions made within the conscious experience (which makes it a conscious experience *of something*).

In the case of property attributions, Montague applies the distinction between the self-representational content of experience and what the experience is about to the distinction between phenomenal properties and naïve properties. In property attributions, I attribute redness to the chair in virtue of the phenomenal property of redness, and I consider the naïve property of redness to belong to the chair insofar as the experience is about the chair. The relation between these two properties is one of perfect similarity (one limiting case of resemblance). As Montague puts it:

In being aware of the phenomenological property, we are *ipso facto* aware of the [naïve-]color property we attribute to the object experienced as a full objective property of the object. The relevant phenomenological property is fully manifest in our experience, and it is partly and essentially in virtue of being aware of that

[phenomenal] property that [naïve-] redness is attributed to the object as an entirely objective property of it. The resemblance relation then explains how (i) the phenomenological property is internally related to (ii) the naïve property attributed to the object. (98)

Where standard representationalists argue wrongly that physical properties of objects are internally related to the phenomenology of experience, Brentanianism suggests that the properties internally related to the phenomenology of experience are naïve color properties (e.g., the red of the table) that match phenomenal colors. This resemblance explains the relation between the phenomenological properties and the physical properties at a lower cost than standard representationalism, without denying any relation between them, as Fregeanism does, and with a more parsimonious account of the veridicality of visual color experience than the one suggested by Chalmers's account of Edenic content.

As a special kind of representationalism, this particular sense of awareness of awareness is also the best option to account not only for the relation between the representational and phenomenological properties of experience (e.g., for how the attributions of color properties in visual experience are made: chapter 5) but also to account for object perception. The phenomenologically given cannot be limited to perceptual property attributions if it is co-constituted by the self-representational nature of the experience (which makes it a *conscious* experience) and by property attributions of a kind involving conscious experiences of tables and chairs. If I am conscious of a chair, and not of mere color spots, then something different from the sensory phenomenology must take place if tables and chairs are to be phenomenologically given. This is what Montague argues in chapter 6 by bringing cognitive phenomenology into the picture. Her thesis here is that our perceptual experiences seem to be of concrete, unified physical objects; this is what she calls the “phenomenological particularity fact”. In perceptual experiences, at least some part of the content is clearly general, for some features of our experiences are sharable. Generalists such as McGinn can't really account for the phenomenological particularity fact: for them, two experiences can have exactly the same phenomenological content but different external objects (120). From a generalist's standpoint, particularity can be accounted for by the fact that we discriminate the objects of seeing and thinking differently: when seeing the tallest man in the jungle, color and shape properties feature differently from when I am *thinking* about the tallest man in the jungle, and in the latter case, spatial location does not seem to play a role, as it does in the former case. But this is not enough for an account of particularity, as Montague stresses: shape is not a marker of an object's boundaries. The circular shape of the plate on the table is not what makes me see this object as a plate: rather, it is because I see this object as a circular plate (as a plate having the property of circularity) that I can determine its boundaries with a shape. In Montague's words: “There is a sense in which the phenomenology of particularity is phenomenologically prior to shape experience in so far as we are concerned with the shapes of objects, and thus shape experience cannot explain the phenomenological particularity fact” (124). Therefore, sensory properties such as shapes cannot account for particularity. Particularists such as Martin may seem to be here in a better position, but they can't account adequately for phenomenological particularity in hallucinations.

This leaves us with cognitive phenomenology as the last possible option. In Montague's view, the particularity fact can be accounted for in terms of a demonstrative thought of the form: ‘that (thing) F’. Such demonstrative thoughts, she suggests, manifests a fundamental category of our thinking: the category of *object* (138).

This object positing accounts for both generality and particularity. One could describe the form of the demonstrative thought as ‘that-thing-as-an-F’ (though Montague does not use hyphens). In sum, demonstrative thoughts show most clearly that our perceptual experiences seem to be of concrete, unified physical objects. Since they involve both generality and particularity, generalist and particularist accounts are both inadequate. The only option to account for the phenomenology of such thoughts is therefore cognitive phenomenology.

Concluding chapter 6, Montague suggests that the ‘phenomenological particularity fact’ could be cashed out in terms of Kant’s ‘transcendental object= x ’, i.e. the object in general. The idea would be that “having and deploying the concept *object* is a necessary condition of our having experience at all” (139). Taken literally, the Kantian necessity claim seems to be too strong for the ‘phenomenological particularity fact’ thesis, for it suggests that there is no sensory phenomenology without cognitive phenomenology, a claim which Montague does not make. One could argue for the thesis that cognitive phenomenology is not restricted to propositional attitudes by making the point that there are object-positing experiences, e.g. non-propositional beliefs such as believing in F, which cannot be cashed out in terms of sensory phenomenology. If this is correct, then demonstrative thoughts could still be the best illustration of the ‘phenomenological particularity fact’ if one argues that they involve such non-propositional beliefs. In fact, Brentano argued for this thesis on demonstrative thoughts, which seems a more natural account of the ‘phenomenological particularity fact’ than the Kantian necessity claim.

If object positing is determinative of how we perceive and think about particular objects, what makes it the case that my seeing the staple on my table is a seeing *of* the staple? Montague discusses this question in chapter 7. Her proposal is that the properties represented in the seeing have to match to a certain degree the properties of the staple (145). Her account of the matching relation rests on a narrow conception of the properties represented in the seeing: if I see the garden shed as a pink elephant due to some disorder in my visual system, I don’t see the shed at all, Montague argues, for visual contact (causal and sensory contact) is not enough for one to have perceptual contact. Seeing involves a ‘certain specific kind of phenomenological content’ (154), which, in the garden shed/pink elephant case, is not there. Here, this specific kind of phenomenological content obviously involves the same elements as in the demonstrative thought ‘that-thing-as-an-F’: you successfully see a garden shed when the phenomenological properties of your seeing minimally match the naïve properties of a garden shed. In order to ‘see-that-thing-as-an-F’, you must attribute some naïve property F to the object of your seeing, and these properties must be correctly attributed, at least to a minimal extent, in order for you to have perceptual contact with the thing as an F. Here again, cognitive phenomenology plays a central role in accounting for successful seeing.

Chapters 5 to 7 made the case that cognitive phenomenology is necessary if one wants to account for the phenomenological properties involved in object perception. Now chapters 8 and 9 argue in more detail for the theses that conscious thought and conscious emotions are irreducible cognitive-phenomenological and evaluative-phenomenological phenomena respectively. I will limit myself here to the case of conscious emotions (chapter 9). As in the conscious thought that Vienna is on the Danube, or in the perception of a chair, in which the world appears to me as having the corresponding properties of the experience, we find in conscious emotions the same phenomenon. These experiences, Montague holds, are such that in them, the world appears to us as disgusting, wonderful, sad, etc. (216). The property attributions involved in conscious emotions are what Montague calls “emotion-value properties”, or what we could simply call values. Emotions, she states – in a way reminiscent of the Austro-German value

theories of Brentano, Ehrenfels, Meinong, and Scheler – “are experiences of value rather than just representations of value” (219). She argues for the *sui generis* nature of evaluative phenomenology by challenging the proponents of a theory of emotions in terms of evaluative judgments to account for the plausible intuition (which she calls the ‘correct feeling condition’) that “we cannot judge that our friend’s death is sad [...] and at the same time [...] have only a positive feeling” (224-5). The evaluative judgment theorist could say that the correctness of our emotions is just the causal co-variation between the positive (or negative) value attributions and the positive (or negative) feelings. Such a view cannot explain how and why we experience the correctness of our emotions, but the *sui generis* evaluative phenomenology view can: we experience the correctness of our emotions because our emotions, and the evaluative phenomenology that is part of them, represent the appropriate value features (226). This suggests a natural affinity between Montague’s conception of evaluative phenomenology as *sui generis* and certain fitting-attitude accounts of value inspired by Brentano, for whom values are the objects of appropriate, or correct, emotional attitudes.

One minor concern about the discussion of evaluative phenomenology: while the *sui generis* natures of cognitive and evaluative phenomenology are motivated separately in the book, cognition and emotion are equally object-positing, which makes it natural to accept evaluative phenomenology on the same grounds as cognitive phenomenology. One could however accept *sui generis* cognitive phenomenology for conscious thoughts (or remain neutral about it) and not necessarily accept *sui generis* evaluative phenomenology for conscious emotions. Some perceptual theories of emotions, such as Meinong’s and more recent models influenced by him, hold for instance that emotions are perception-like mental states, and not *sui generis* mental attitudes that involve their own phenomenology. It would be interesting to explore whether these alternatives are real challenges to the view that evaluative phenomenology is *sui generis*.

The book is written in an excellent and engaging style. It contributes to the discussion of cognitive and evaluative phenomenology in a very fruitful way, arguing for it from a new starting point, namely, the total mental content, in a way that will be appealing for philosophers of different backgrounds and convictions.¹

Guillaume Fr chet

¹ Thanks to Michelle Montague and Johannes L. Brandl for their comments on a previous version of this review.