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## THE PHILOSOPHER'S PROJECTIVE ERROR

In *Consciousness and Cognition*, Michael Thau adopts bold and engaging positions on a wide range of connected topics; his resourceful arguments in support of these positions amply repay reflection. At the same time, readers may find it difficult to accept the resulting metaphysics as a serious candidate for belief. To some it will seem that the book contains its own unintended *reductio ad absurdum*, as philosophy books – even excellent ones – sometimes do. More charitable readers may still find the account seriously incomplete in key respects, rendering any evaluation of the metaphysics premature. In what follows, I offer some reflections on the nature of what I will call “Thau-properties” – internally specified properties that are distinct from but correspond to the colors, shapes, etc. I will argue that Thau-properties are metaphysically spookier than Thau lets on. I will also sketch a version of the theory of perceptual qualia, and argue that (a) qualia theory suggests a natural point of resistance to Thau’s Mary argument for the existence of Thau-properties, and that (b) qualia are less spooky than Thau-properties.

According to Thau, the colors, sizes, distances, shapes, tastes, smells, sounds, textures, etc. of perceived things, and bodily sensations – all properties which can serve as the semantic values of predicates like ‘red’, ‘large’, ‘far’, ‘cube’, ‘sweet’, ‘rotten-egg’, ‘middle C’, ‘silky’, and ‘pain’ – are *not* represented in perception. The properties with which we are perceptually acquainted are distinct from but correspond to the colors, shapes, etc., of perceived things. What distinguishes a belief that an object is red from a perception according to which it *looks* red is precisely the kind of prop-

erty each represents, and not the nature of any alleged doxastic or perceptual intermediary between the subject and the relevant proposition (220). The Thau-property a perceiver is visually acquainted with when looking at a ripe tomato is not redness, but rather an intrinsic surface property *in virtue of which* the tomato looks red (231). Thau-properties are represented *in* perception, though we can say that the mundane colors, shapes, sizes, etc. of things are represented *by* perception (268 n. 24). The Thau-properties that a thing appears to have are internally specified (Ch. 1 *passim*, and 237); presumably, then, they are a form of narrow content.

Surprisingly, Thau *contrasts* consciousness with cognition: “The difference between consciousness and cognition is a difference in the kinds of properties that the propositions to which they relate us ascribe to objects.” (225; see also 222) But surely it is wrong to so contrast consciousness with cognition. For one thing, cognitive states such as beliefs are often conscious, even beliefs that make no reference to Thau-properties. And cognition can be partly perceptual in nature, as it is in Thau’s central example when Mary says, “So fire engines have *that* property.” Thau notes that the belief expressible as “The object I am looking at has *that* property” is not too different from a perception. (Sometimes you *can* believe your eyes.) The distinction that Thau needs, I think, is not really that between consciousness and cognition, but rather that between *linguistically-mediated* cognition and *imagistically-mediated* cognition, where the latter category includes cognitions that refer to or express properties given in perception or imagination. Thau might reject my terminology as suggesting precisely the kinds of intermediaries that he wants to exclude from the ontology of belief and perception. The point remains that the distinction between Thau-properties and properties that can be the semantic values of names or predicates does not line up with the consciousness/cognition distinction, nor with the perception/belief distinction, but rather with the distinction between linguistically-mediated cognition and imagistically-mediated cognition.

Thau-properties are *ineffable* in the sense that they cannot be the semantic value of any name or predicate (264 n. 6). A Thau-property may be referred to by way of a descriptive predicate it uniquely satisfies, and may be referred to by way of a perceptually-backed demonstrative such as '*that* property'. But if a Thau-property could be directly referred to by a proper name, or directly expressed by a predicate, then as Thau notes, his Mary argument could be turned against his own view. For prior to learning that the colored object she is seeing is red, Mary might know that fire engines are (or have) R, but wonder whether fire engines have *that* property. If Thau's argument is sound in the first place, then *that* property must be distinct from R, contrary to our supposition. So the theory needs Thau-properties to be ineffable. But this renders Thau-properties spooky.

If Thau-properties are genuine properties of external things, then it is mysterious why our explicit attempts to refer to (or to express) them by way of names or predicates must fail. We can demonstratively refer to Thau-properties, and get intersubjective agreement about them, as when A asserts, "Fire engines have *that* property", and B replies, "Yes, they do." (Assume that A and B are not perceptually inverted vis-à-vis each other.) Thau-properties, though internally specified, are not perceptually represented as *private* properties, whatever that might mean; they are represented as intrinsic properties of public objects. Subsequent discourse may include pronouns anaphorically linked to '*that* property', as when B says, "Ripe tomatoes have it, too." A thinker may make a memory-based reference to *that* property. Suppose the memory image is *less vivid* than the original perception, as would typically be the case; must the memory-based reference for that reason fail? That seems a harsh doctrine. The asserted sentence "Fire engines have *that* property" might persist in consciousness or short-term memory even as the perceptual image gradually fades; it is difficult to see why the reference of the memory-based demonstrative must fail in such a case.

Suppose that a person, while looking at red object, attempts an explicit Kripkean baptism: "Let 'R' express (refer

to) *that* property.” If she later sincerely utters, “Fire engines are (have) R”, there need be no defect in her linguistic understanding. If there is also no defect in her memory or her understanding of the world, then she is saying something *true*. But if she says something *true* (or even if she lies or is forgetful and says something *false*), then she says *something*. Thau cannot allow this, but the nature of this speaker’s failure is mysterious.

In perception Thau-properties are supposed to be internally specified, but this does not explain the failure of attempts to name or express them. The alleged internal specification is not an intrinsic characteristic of the property as such, but rather of its presentation in perception. There is no reason why a property that is internally specified on one occasion must be internally specified on all occasions. A later sincere utterance of ‘Fire engines are (have) R’ seems truth-apt, and the speaker will not explode.

Thau argues that “what it is for one of these properties to be represented to you is for you to be visually or imaginatively acquainted with it”, and therefore the only way to coin a name or predicate to refer to or express a Thau-property is for an utterance of the word to *cause* a visual or imaginative presentation of the property (223). But this is just as mysterious as the claim of ineffability, and as much in need of explanation. Given the power and flexibility of natural language names and predicates, and the freedom we enjoy in introducing them, why can’t we introduce a name or predicate while visually presented with a Thau-property, re-employing the term later without being visually or imaginatively acquainted with the property? Thau writes: “The reason we cannot coin a predicate to refer to one of these properties is that *the phenomenology of your conscious experience just is a matter of having these properties represented to you.*” (225) I confess I do not understand how this can be “the reason”, or even a reason; if the operative direction is the right-to-left claim, that having a Thau-property represented to you *just is* having the conscious experience, then this is just as mysterious as the claim of ineffability.

As a qualia theorist, I take the spooky ineffability of Thau-properties to be a symptom of, hence evidence for, their being a *philosopher's projective error* – they are a manifestation of our tendency, when reflecting on the relation between perception and the world, to treat what are in fact certain properties of perceptions as themselves perceived, or as properties of things perceived, or as represented in perception as properties of things perceived. The intentionalist's warning about *generalized use-mention confusion* (35–37) is well-taken, as it is indeed a difficult and delicate matter to distinguish properties of perceptions from properties of things perceived. But the warning cuts both ways, and from the perspective of the qualia theory, Thau-properties, as well as Lockean ideas, and old-fashioned sense-data in the style of Russell and Moore, all make a similar mistake: all treat what are in fact properties of perceptual states as themselves perceived, or as properties of things perceived, or as represented in perception as properties of things perceived. This is a theoretician's error, not one that we make in ordinary perception. For according to the qualia theory, at least in the version I want to sketch as a foil to Thau's account, qualia are not in any way perceived, are not properties of things perceived, and are not represented in perception as properties of things perceived; they are, instead, intrinsic properties of perceptual states.

The connection of these points to the ineffability of Thau-properties is as follows. The claim that we cannot introduce natural language names or predicates for Thau-properties on the basis of ordinary perceptual experience would have been natural enough if they had been properties of perceptual states and not themselves perceived, or properties of things perceived, or represented in perception as properties of things perceived. I take the spookiness and ineffability of Thau-properties to be an echo or symptom of their being the result a philosopher's projective error. Thau's theory is in some *de re* sense tracking qualia; or rather, part of the role that Thau-properties play in the theory would be better played by qualia. For example, the peculiar idea that the only way a

Thau-property can be represented to a person is for her to be visually or imaginatively acquainted with it, so that any word for the property would have to *cause* visual or imaginative acquaintance with it, suggests that Thau-properties still play something of the role of *vehicles* of cognition; the relevant cognition is somehow incomplete if the Thau-property is not represented *in a certain way*. But in taking these properties to be represented in perception as properties of external things, while retaining the idea that we cannot assign to them natural language names or predicates on the basis of ordinary perception, we render them spooky.

There is a great hovering but un-asked (in this book) question about Thau-properties: when, if ever, do external objects actually have them? Thau is always careful to say that perception represents perceived objects as having Thau-properties, rather than that perceived objects have Thau-properties, and he tells us nothing about when such representations are veridical. Given the range and ambition of the book, this question comes to seem in the end like a studiously ignored elephant in the room. Thau himself says, in a different context, that “whenever something perceptually seems some way to someone, there is always a question of whether the thing really is that way and, hence, always a question of truth or falsity.” (45; see also 41) I want to argue that in the case of Thau-properties, no good answer to this question is even available. Here is a trilemma: the answer will have to be either “always”, “never”, or “sometimes”. But none of these is plausible.

The first answer, “always”, would say that perception is always veridical with respect to the properties represented in perception. Indeed, Thau does say, about a generic Thau-property, “It is exactly as it seems to be.” (45) But this metaphysically promiscuous “always” cannot be Thau’s considered view. For one of Thau’s main themes is that we should not try to explain our fallible cognitive capacities with respect to the world in terms of infallible capacities with respect to mental intermediaries such as sense-data or intentional objects:

But, as we've also seen, another (sometimes hidden) motivation for positing mental intermediaries is the thought that our fallible epistemic access to the stuff in the world is grounded in a less fallible access to some other kind of thing. Sense-data and intentional objects are always as they seem to be; ... Though it would in some ways be comforting to think that we had access to a realm of things that wasn't as fallible as our access to the stuff in the world, what you've just read has, in part, been an attempt to show that the thought can't be sustained. (238; see also 58 and 243 n. 9)

One might try to understand Thau-properties as somehow relational with respect to our perceptions, or as created by our perceptions, so as to make their representation self-confirming. But visual Thau-properties are presented in perception as intrinsic surface properties, and the point of the remark "It is exactly as it seems to be" is presumably to deny that Thau-properties have some relational nature that would be at odds with their appearance in perception as intrinsic.

The second answer, "never", would say that properties represented in perception are always *misrepresented*. One way to develop this error theory of sensory consciousness would be to deny the existence of Thau-properties; to say that they are represented in perception as properties of external things is not yet to say that they *exist*. An account along these lines might appeal to gappy propositions, or to truth-value gaps, but "never" – never accurate, never veridical – would still be the final verdict. Another way to develop the view would acknowledge the existence of Thau-properties as such, but add that they are nowhere instantiated in the actual world. Either way of developing the error theory would make a mystery of how we gain empirical knowledge, and in fact would make a mystery of the contribution of perception to our well-being and biological survival. These mysteries might be broached by exploiting correlations between the representations of Thau-properties and the colors, shapes, etc. of external things. But it is difficult to see how we could gain *knowledge* of the external world, as opposed to merely true beliefs, on the basis of the uniformly false deliverances of perception. A different tack might be to exploit, as the basis for our empirical knowledge of colors, shapes, etc., our



*self-knowledge* of which Thau-properties we perceptually represent. But it is dubious that we have enough such self-knowledge to ground our empirical knowledge of the world; besides, the proposal seems to over-intellectualize empirical knowledge, certainly for lower animals, but also for us in our less reflective moments. Moreover, Thau says that Mary *learns* that fire engines have *that* property, and 'learns' is a success predicate. (However, 268 n. 20 suggests that this is not an essential feature of Thau's Mary argument.) Thau also has harsh words for the relevantly similar projective error theory (203). So it is unlikely that Thau would answer 'never'.

The answer "sometimes" is of course only a beginning; we should like to know much more about when Thau-properties are veridically represented, and when not. Perhaps "sometimes" has to be the right way to begin, since in cases of hallucination there may be no object at all to bear the Thau-property represented in perception. However, two dark obstacles to the development of any such account can be seen to loom.

The first is an objective-subjective dilemma. If Thau-properties are objective properties of external things, if they are, for example, physical properties of the surfaces of objects, then it should be possible to run a Mary argument on them. The nature of the Thau-properties could be expressed in a public language; Mary could know about such properties without their having been presented to her in perception, and then (if Thau's argument is sound in the first place) there would be no good account of the belief she registers by her utterance of "So fire engines have *that* property", when she learns that the object she is looking at is red. The other horn of the dilemma is that if Thau-properties are in some sense subjective, then given that they are presented in perception as intrinsic surface properties of external things, we have to abandon Thau's idea that "It is exactly as it seems to be". Thau-properties might turn out to have a nature greatly at odds with how they appear. They might, for example, turn out to be essentially



relational in nature. The relevant relation might turn out to be their tendency to cause our qualia.

The second obstacle that looms for the development of the answer "sometimes" concerns the internal specification of Thau-properties. For it is not plausible that the conditions under which any given Thau-property is *correctly* represented are fixed by internal states of the perceiver. If some of a perceiver's representations of Thau-properties are veridical and others are not, this is presumably because *normal* or *ideal* perceptual conditions sometimes obtain and sometimes do not. Under some environmental conditions, vision is accurate; under others, vision is deceived. The specification of these normal or ideal environmental conditions is not plausibly a matter internal to the perceiver's head or non-relational aspects of her mind. But if the conditions under which a Thau-property is correctly represented are externally fixed, then we could run a Twin Earth argument with respect to the representation of the Thau-property. Adam and Twin-Adam could be identical in all internal non-relational respects, yet the Thau-property that Adam represents in perception could have different conditions of correct representation than the Thau-property that Twin-Adam represents. The Thau-property Adam represents would then be distinct from the Thau-property that Twin-Adam represents. This result would undercut a major motivation for postulating Thau-properties in the first place, namely, the intuitive idea that there is something about perception that is internally specified.

The unanswerability of the question "When do external objects actually have Thau-properties?" derives, I suggest, from the fact that Thau-properties are a manifestation of our tendency to make the philosopher's projective error. Part of the role that Thau-properties play in the theory would have been better played by qualia; on the other hand, a given Thau-property is represented in perception as a property of an external thing, and "It is exactly as it seems to be." This gives rise to the tensions described above. Thau-properties are supposed to be, by their very nature, internally specified; but no objective property of external things could be, by its very

nature, internally specified. The embarrassments that afflict every possible answer would not have arisen had Thau-properties been properties of perceptual states and not themselves perceived, or properties of things perceived, or represented in perception as properties of things perceived.

According to the version of qualia theory that I want to endorse, Thau is correct that there is something about perceptual experience that is internally specified (i.e., necessarily shared by Twins), and that determines what it is like to have a given perceptual experience. Twin Earth and inverted spectrum arguments show that any given quale does not essentially represent any specific mundane color, shape, location, etc. But all that is represented in perception are just the mundane colors, shapes, locations, etc. of things. I hold that we can be explicitly, distinctly, and non-experientially aware of qualia, but that this is a sophisticated rational achievement. Are ordinary, non-sophisticated perceivers, such as Thau's Mary, implicitly and non-experientially aware of their qualia? Yes, but only in the minimal sense that when Mary is perceptually conscious of external objects and properties, her qualia contribute in characteristically mentalistic ways to her mental economy: in virtue of her qualia, Mary is perceptually conscious of external objects and properties, and her qualia causally contribute to Mary's judgments of how external things appear, and to her judgments of what it is like for her to be perceptually conscious of them. None of this entails that qualia are experienced or perceived or represented in perception, and so it is compatible with a version of Moore's point about diaphanousness: when we attend to what is *experienced in perception*, we are aware of only the mundane properties, colors, shapes, etc., that perception represents other things as having.

How would a qualia theory along these lines defend against Thau's Mary argument of Ch. 5 §4? Thau's Mary is not omniscient about the physical facts, and she is philosophically innocent. She is not supposed to be, for example, a theoretical Thau-ist, and no such conviction can play a legitimate role in fixing the referent of her expression '*that*

property' when she exclaims, "So fire engines have *that* property", upon learning that the colored object she is looking at is red. Note that this is a peculiar and stilted form of expression for a theoretical innocent such as Mary to use; much more natural, even given her peculiar fixation on fire engines, would have been to say, for example, "So *that's* how fire engines look", or "So *that's* what fire engines look like." Suppose, though, that she *does* say "So fire engines have *that* property"; what new information could she be registering? A plausible answer, according to the qualia theorist, is that she registers the newly acquired belief that seeing a fire engine is an experience of *this* type, where 'this' demonstratively refers to a feature of her experience. This is not implausible as an account of the implicit belief that would have been expressed by "So *that's* how fire engines look." According to this response, Mary's actual utterance *expresses* a proposition that she already believed, namely, that fire engines are red. But she *registers* newly acquired information that attributes a certain character to visual experience of fire engines.

Thau's discussion in Ch. 5 §8 suggests that his main complaint about this line would be that it violates Moore's point about diaphanousness: Mary is not aware of any property of her experience, so no such property can figure in the belief that she would express by uttering, "So *that's* what fire engines look like." I agree that Mary does not *experience* any property of her experience, and I agree that Mary lacks any explicit, distinct, non-experiential awareness of any property of her experience. Nevertheless, since Mary is perceptually conscious of the object and its redness, she is implicitly aware of her quale, in the minimal sense that her quale makes characteristic contributions to her mental economy. Her quale causally contributes to Mary's judgments of how external things appear in conscious perception, and to her judgments of what it is like to be perceptually conscious of them. So it is plausible that her quale stands ready to serve as a constituent of her newly acquired belief that seeing a fire engine is an experience of *this* type, where 'this' demonstratively refers to the relevant feature of her experience. The greater naturalness

of the expression “So *that’s* how fire engines (and red things generally) look”, for Mary in her situation, enhances the plausibility of this account of the new information that Mary registers.

It might be suspected that Thau’s account enjoys greater theoretical economy, or greater faithfulness to the phenomenology of conscious perception, than qualia theory, since it dispenses with any notion of non-experiential awareness of properties of experience. To forestall this suspicion, I offer a final puzzle about Thau-properties. Consider a case of ordinary visual representation, under ideal conditions, of a sphere as round. Thau’s account seems committed to a puzzling distinction between two beliefs: (a) that expressed by “The object I am looking at has *that* shape”, where ‘*that* shape’ picks out the roundness that the sphere looks to have and which is represented *by* vision, and (b) that expressed by “The object I am looking at has *that* property”, where ‘*that* property’ picks out the Thau-property in virtue of which the object *looks* round and which is represented *in* vision. (I assume that visually backed demonstratives can pick out either sort of property).

Compare this distinction with a parallel distinction that a qualia theorist might make between two beliefs: (c) that expressed by “The object I am looking at has *that* shape”, where ‘*that* shape’ picks out the roundness that the sphere looks to have, and (d) that expressed by “My perception of the object I am looking at has *that* quale”, where ‘*that* quale’ picks out a quality of visual experience in virtue of which the object looks round. I suggest that a comparison of these distinctions shows that Thau’s account enjoys no advantage of faithfulness to the phenomenology of perception. Thau’s distinction seems theoretically artificial to me when I reflect on the phenomenology of my own visual experience. The qualia theory’s parallel distinction seems more natural.

Insofar as I can recognize the former distinction in the phenomenology of my visual experience, I am forced to treat my awareness of one of the two properties as non-experiential, for I am certain that my total visual experience does not

include two sub-experiences of distinct properties of the sphere. So Thau's view cannot plausibly escape the need for non-experiential awareness of properties of the sphere, and therefore enjoys no theoretical economy in virtue of doing without non-experiential awareness of qualia.

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