

Supervaluation for Papineau's Phenomenal Concepts

Christopher Mole

Washington University in Saint Louis

José Luis Bermúdez (2004) argues that two claims in David Papineau's (2002) book, *Thinking About Consciousness*, are "directly in conflict". The two claims are that (1) Phenomenal properties are identical to physical properties, and that (2) Phenomenal concepts are vague. Bermúdez is right that there is a problem here, but Papineau can either deny that it is a problem *for him*, by assimilating it to one of the puzzles that we must learn to live with in our treatment of vagueness, or else he can avoid the problem altogether by making a slight modification to his theory, of a sort that he should have no objection to.

The vagueness of phenomenal concepts, as Papineau understands it, results from the possibility of creatures that are sufficiently remote from the normal course of experience for it never to have been settled whether English predicates such as ' _ is in pain' apply to them. Among the unsettled cases, Papineau thinks, are 'doppelgangers', where a doppelganger is structurally similar to a pain-feeling human, but is made of silicon.

There is no fact of the matter as to whether the doppelganger is in pain, because nothing in previous usage fixes whether it [the predicate ' _ is in pain'] should apply

to physical P [which he lacks] or structural S [which he has] when the question is raised. (Papineau 2003)

The claim that the English predicate ‘_ is in pain’ applies indeterminately to some cases is surely true. Morphine pain is one such case, and so is the phenomenal state that results from being tickled too much. More controversial is Papineau’s account of why the doppelganger must be one of the indeterminate cases.

Papineau does not only think that ‘_ is in pain’ has borderline cases, but also that it is never more than vaguely true, of any given material property, that it is the referent of the predicate ‘_ is in pain’ (or of the corresponding phenomenal concept).

Bermúdez complains that this indeterminacy of reference for phenomenal concepts is inconsistent with Papineau’s claims about the referents of those phenomenal concepts being identical to material properties. The problem is this: if Papineau’s identity claim is the claim that ‘_ is in pain’ refers to a property that is identical to a material property then it seems to entail that there is a material property that ‘_is in pain’ refers to, and so that it is true (without a hint of vagueness) that that property is the referent of ‘_is in pain’. This last claim contradicts the vagueness claim as stated at the end of the previous paragraph, according to which it is never more than vaguely true, of any material property, that it is the referent of ‘_is in pain’.

The form of reference indeterminacy that Papineau thinks accounts for the vagueness of phenomenal concepts is not incoherent by itself. Papineau doesn't offer an account of how these semantic phenomena work, but he does suggest (2003) that the example of the term 'Whale Oil', as discussed in Block (2002), is a parallel case. The example illustrates the way in which a substance term, *S*, can function perfectly well in a language, and can figure in sentences that are non-vaguely true, even when there is no property of which it is non-vaguely true that '*_* being *S*' refers to that property. We can see an example that doesn't depend on ignorance, or on issues around *natural* kinds, by supposing that Jones's Brewery is taken over by a multinational, which moves production to a different site. Is the post-takeover beer the same beer as the pre-takeover beer, or is it a different beer sold under the same name? If the answer is indeterminate, as it may well be, then it was indeterminate, pre-takeover, which property was referred to by '*_* is Jones's Beer'. It was indeterminate whether '*_* is Jones's beer' refers to a property that does, or to a property that does not, require such-and-such a manufacturing process. It was nonetheless possible, in the pre-takeover days, to say something that was non-vaguely true when one said 'This is Jones's Beer'.

It is important for Papineau's purposes that the indeterminacy does not go away when a demonstrative is used to pick out (indeterminately) the property that is being talked about. One can utter something indeterminate, and only vaguely true, by saying 'this beer (*demonstrating* a pre-takeover pint) is the same beer as this beer (*demonstrating* a post-takeover pint)'. And one can say something

which is indeterminate, but which is nonetheless true (without the slightest hint of vagueness) when, with two demonstrations of the same pre-takeover pint, one says, "This beer is the same beer as this beer".

It is notable that "This beer is the same beer as this beer", when accompanied with the appropriate demonstrations, is true on every acceptable precisification of its terms. The same is true of the existentially quantified sentence 'There is a property that "_ is Jones's Beer" refers to'. Noting this one is tempted to go supervaluationist, and say that any sentence that is true on every acceptable precisification of its terms is a true one (see Fine (1975)). The supervaluationist principle counts the existentially quantified sentence as true, but none of its instances are more than vaguely true: It is true to say "There is a property that '_ is Jones's Beer' refers to", but not true (or not strictly true) to say of any particular physical property that it is identical to the property of being Jones's beer.

One might be unhappy with the supervaluationist's combination of a true existentially quantified sentence with a lack of any true instances, but it is crucial for the supervaluationist's solution to the sorites paradox. It is this that enables the supervaluationist to deny the problematic sorites-generating premise, according to which one grain never makes the difference between a heap and a non-heap ($\neg \exists n(H_{n+1} \wedge \neg H_n)$), without being committed to any claim of the form $(H_{n+1} \wedge \neg H_n)$, and so without having to find any actual heaps that are a grain

away from non-existence. Accepting the same combination of true existential quantification with less-than-true instances, will mean that the supervaluationist is unmoved by the line of reasoning that Bermudez brought against Papineau. Papineau's identity claim is, of course, an existentially quantified one. (It is not an empirical hypothesis about the identity of phenomenal properties with any particular material properties.) And since the phenomenal concepts are indeterminate, and no less indeterminate on account of the demonstrative-like way in which Papineau thinks they pick out their referents, the supervaluationist about indeterminate reference can accept the identity claim, without being committed to the non-vague truth of any of its instances, and this non-committedness was what Papineau wanted from his vagueness claim.

So, if Papineau goes supervaluationist he can stick to his identity claim, and to his vagueness claim, and can block Bermúdez's argument at the point when it moves from "There is a material property that 'is in pain' refers to" to "It is true (without a hint of vagueness) that that property is the referent of 'is in pain'."

This is not to say that Papineau needs a supervaluationist treatment of vagueness and indeterminacy in general if he is to employ this strategy. He could block Bermúdez's argument just as well, without committing himself to supervaluationism as a general semantic principle, by retreating ever so slightly from his identity claim to version of it that has had the supervaluationism built in. That is to say, he could step back from saying that the referents of

phenomenal concepts are identical with material properties, and say instead that, on every acceptable precisification, the referents of phenomenal concepts are identical with material properties.

I can see no reason why Papineau should resist this very small retreat. He makes his identity claim on the grounds that properties not identical to material properties are excluded from causal work by the completeness of physics, but since causal claims that differ only in the precisification of their terms need not threaten to exclude one another, the causal efficacy of the phenomenal seems no less secure after the retreat has been made.

References

Bermúdez, J.L. (2004) 'Vagueness, Phenomenal Concepts and Mind-Brain Identity' *Analysis* 64.2 134-39

Block, N. (2003) 'The Harder Problem of Consciousness' *Disputatio* 15: 5-49

Fine, K. (1975) 'Vagueness, Truth and Logic' reprinted in Rosanna Keefe and Peter Smith (eds.) (1997) *Vagueness: A Reader* MIT Press

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

Papineau, D. (2003) 'Could There Be A Science of Consciousness?' in *Philosophical Topics* 13: 205-20