



**Review of *Blockheads!: Essays on Ned Block's Philosophy of Mind and Consciousness*, A. Pautz and D. Stoljar (eds.). Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019. 634 pp**

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## 1 Introduction

Ned Block's work in the philosophy of mind over the past six decades constitutes a truly impressive achievement. His views on the metaphysics of mind—e.g., functionalism and materialism—are extraordinarily influential in mainstream philosophy, and constitute one of the best-known approaches to the foundations of cognitive psychology. His writings on the semantics of psychological states in the 1980s likewise continue to be influential. His most recent work, on consciousness and perception, occupies center stage in *Blockheads*. Metaphysics gets some airtime as well, and Block's conceptual-role semantics is mentioned, but doesn't play much of a role in the arguments highlighted here.

This volume gives the field's top minds an opportunity to critically reflect on Block's overall position, which has remained largely consistent over the years, setting aside the terminological shifts that he notes in several of his replies. It is a huge benefit to the field to have Block offer individual responses to each paper, often quite detailed and valuable in their own right. The editors should be praised for putting together a volume that gives us a valuable snapshot of the current state of play in empirically-informed philosophy of mind.

I won't have the space to review all 18 of the papers and all 18 of Block's replies. I'll cover as many as I can, but my own interests necessarily bias the selection. Accordingly, there won't be much discussion of direct realism (Brewer), physicalism (Jackson), spatial experience (Chalmers), internalism (Pautz), alien subjectivity (Lee), or android subjectivity (McLaughlin). These papers are worth reading, and Block's insightful replies will be of considerable interest—particularly to specialists, but also to anyone interested to learn where top philosophers of mind currently stand on major issues.

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## 2 Perception

Tyler Burge begins his paper, “Psychological Content and Egocentric Indexes,” by noting that it doesn’t connect with Block’s work, beyond being “in the spirit” of the empirically informed approach to the mind. The connection is disappointingly thin—a missed opportunity, which Block’s reply corrects. Burge defends several key theses that will be familiar to readers of his *Origins of Objectivity*. His overall strategy is to point out that perceptual psychology is an up-and-running science that makes non-trivial use of the notion of *mental representation*, and then to mine the details of the methodology and the substantive results it produces, seeking payoffs for longstanding philosophical debates.

To my mind, there is some distance between what (all?) perceptual psychologists say, on the one hand, and the interpretations of their work that Burge is recommending. It seems unlikely that perceptual psychologists are themselves agreed about the philosophical underpinnings of their research. Perhaps sufficient consensus has been reached on the specific points that Burge highlights, but there is little argument for that here. The resulting view, while important, influential, and impressively informed, can sometimes seem to be *imposed* on “what psychologists say,” rather than being derived from it. Burge thus runs the risk of simply *stipulating* about how philosophers should employ various bits of theoretical vocabulary.

Block registers broad agreement with Burge and shifts the discussion to a debate that the two have pursued in other publications. Block holds that adaptation is a necessary condition for a representation to be perceptual, rather than cognitive. Burge doubts that adaptation is a good criterion for drawing this distinction. The reason is this: What appears to be adaptation to high-level perceptual attributives—e.g., facial expressions or relative numerosity—may well be just adaptation to lower-level features, which then carries the high-level attributives along for the ride. For instance, instead of having perceptual representations of numerosity that are directly subject to adaptation, perhaps perceivers adapt to lower-level features, such as the density or total surface area of the numerous items, and then make cognitive (i.e., high-level, non-perceptual) judgments of numerosity only as a consequence of this lower-level adaptation.

Defending the adaptation proposal against this charge, Block appeals to recent experiments that seem to rule out the explanation solely in terms of lower-level features. He also argues against the idea that adaptation can occur at the level of cognition by noting the differences between perceptual rivalry (itself a kind of adaptation phenomenon) and what goes on when we settle on a firm opinion regarding a difficult intellectual problem. The rivalry between two ways of perceiving a Necker cube is exclusive, random, and persistent; belief fixation typically lacks all three of these properties.

Hilary Putnam’s paper, “‘Naïve Realism’ and Qualia,” is a reflection on Block’s work on Wittgenstein. After contrasting his own position with Block’s, Putnam in the end recommends a view according to which there really are sensations—qualitative states that occur between events in the world and our conceptualized perceptual judgments—but these play only a *causal* role, not an epistemic/justificatory role. In particular, we are not directly aware of *them* and then only indirectly of the environment, on the basis of an inference. Rather, sensations *cause* us to token perceptual judgments, but this causal transition is not an inference, because sensations have no

conceptual content. That this is where Putnam arrived late in his thinking on these matters—and that Block’s thoughts on Wittgenstein to some degree drove him there—will be of historical interest to scholars of this century. However, I don’t see that Putnam’s position here differs substantively from what Wilfrid Sellars called “critical realism,” in which case the interest of this paper is *merely* historical.

In “Block and the Representation Theory of Sensory Qualities,” Lycan points out that he shares Block’s token-identity materialism, and that they both believe in the reality of colors and of mental representations thereof. So where’s the difference? Lycan defends representationism: You see X by representing X. The representation can be veridical—there really is an X—but it can also be nonveridical, in which case there is no X, but there is still a representation of X. The represented X is *merely* represented—a nonreal/fictional “intentional object” (a *representatum*)—but Lycan insists on talking about such things in ways that suggest otherwise. This offends Block’s sensibilities, both in the context of the debate over representationism and also in debates about “empty” higher-order representations. For instance, according to Lycan, the best argument against materialism is that afterimages are green, but nothing in the brain or the environment is green. Representationists respond by saying that what is green is the thing that is represented, though that thing happens not to exist. How something can be both literally green and nonexistent is not made clear.

Lycan quickly runs through Block’s “old” objections (c. 1990s) to representationism and offers brief replies, developed more fully elsewhere. He takes inversion cases to be irrelevant and question-begging, argues that phosphenes and male orgasm are both representational, and asks for a moratorium on Swampman. What about Marvin, who learns what it’s like to see red, but doesn’t learn the word for it; what does he learn? Block thinks representationism has no answer. But representationism, Lycan points out, is a theory of sensory qualities, not of learning or concepts or what it’s like or introspection. Another one: You knowingly go to inverted earth and learn the language. Over time, your representational contents shift, but you don’t notice a change in what it’s like. Block asks the representationist: What stays the same? Lycan says the sensory qualities change and your memory gets things wrong. But memory isn’t defective here; it’s functioning fine, but inverted earth is a weird place, and externalism is true of both sensation and memory. Last up—shifted spectra: if sensory qualities change with age, race, etc., then they can’t be exhaustively representational, because representational content stays the same. Lycan points out that representationists who are also color realists must say that some folks are wrong about colors. But why should this be a problem, and why for representationism exclusively?

The debate strikes me as inconclusive, but many important points emerge. Block holds that there are two kinds of “looks” statement—one comparative (“looks like”) and one not (“looks red”). Lycan rejects this distinction, denying that there is a non-comparative sense. Block defends the existence of “mental paint”; Lycan is unclear about what that is, but doesn’t see it as a threat to his brand of representationism. The concession brings Lycan’s view closer to what Janet Levin, in her “Representational Exhaustion,” calls *weak* representationalism.

In his “Phenomenal Character and Physicalism,” Sydney Shoemaker points out that we can explain physical colors in terms of mental qualities, but that we could also go in the opposite direction. Physicalism supports the idea that colors are real and that perceptual states have their properties in virtue of belonging to a family whose structure

maps onto that of the perceptible properties that we compare and discriminate. This focus on discriminability and structural relations is a welcome move. Unfortunately, Shoemaker conflates higher-order awareness with introspection—a view that Block has also championed in his debates with higher-order theorists. But, as many have argued, higher-order states need not themselves be conscious (and won't be in most cases), but their nonconscious occurrence renders a creature aware of its own internal states, thus making *those* states conscious (according to a higher-order view). Introspection, which is distinct from ordinary state-consciousness, would require something more—perhaps a third-order state.

### 3 Attention

Discussions of perception have recently been infused by a welcome dose of empirical information about the role of attention, spawning debates about what exactly attention is and how its involvement in perception affects the going philosophical accounts. In “Attention Alters Appearance,” Marisa Carrasco provides persuasive behavioral and neurocognitive evidence for the claim that attention affects perception, increasing the apparent size, contrast, and other features of perceived stimuli. This claim is central to one of Block's main arguments against representationism. (He rejects the longer label ‘representationalism’, both for its unwieldiness but also because of its historical usage, where it refers to the view that we infer what's in the world by first directly perceiving our mental states.) Philosophers who are keen to see the details of various experimental paradigms, designs, methods, controls, and the like, will benefit from this chapter. Those who simply want the take-away point—the one that Block brings to bear on philosophical debates—can glean it from the first couple of pages, or even from several of the other papers (e.g., Watzl, discussed below).

Block's short reply expresses gratitude for Carrasco's guidance on empirical matters. This, again, felt like a missed opportunity. Block is expert at defending novel interpretations of various laboratory results, so one naturally wonders what reservations he might have (however remote) about the results in question or the methodology used to obtain them. That said, Block makes the philosophical import of Carrasco's work clear by offering the following argument against representationism: Attention affects perception; the same thing can look two different ways, depending on how much attention is involved. Neither of the two ways can be singled out as privileged in its accuracy; both of the percepts are equally good candidates. So perception cannot be a *mere* matter of representation, as representationism claims.

This argument is put through severe scrutiny by Sebastian Watzl, whose paper, “Can Representationalism Explain How Attention Affects Experiences?,” is one of the clearest and most valuable contributions to the collection. Watzl casts Block's argument as an instance of a more general argument schema, exemplified also by a number of familiar thought experiments. He then carefully dissects the logical structure of this argument form, patiently maps out the assumptions that opponents might reject, and diagnoses some of the resulting views as dead ends. Finally, he formulates a novel rejoinder to Block's argument. Block's reply is equally high-quality, making this one of the most useful exchanges in the volume.

## 4 Consciousness

Discussions of perception and attention naturally open up questions about consciousness. In recent decades, Block's famous distinction between access consciousness and phenomenal consciousness has been challenged by proponents of the "higher-order" approach. In this volume, the latter are represented by Lau and Brown, as well as Lycan.

Block and Lycan diverge in how they view the relationship between sensory qualities and phenomenal consciousness. Block thinks these always go together, but Lycan argues that many sensory states have P-conscious affective/motivational components that are not part of their sensory qualities (construed as representational states); similarly, there is "something that it's like" to have P-conscious thoughts, despite there being no sensory quality there. Lycan holds that higher-order representations are needed to turn sensory qualities into P-conscious states. When a person fails to notice some sensory quality that they in fact have, no P-consciousness occurs. Lycan's version of higher-order theory takes the higher-order state to be a kind of perception or attention, not a thought. In his rejoinder, Block points out that this is implausible, since higher-order states should then have their own perceptual phenomenology, contrary to fact.

In their excellent paper, "The Emperor's New Phenomenology? The Empirical Case for Conscious Experiences without First-Order Representations," Hakwan Lau and Richard Brown (L&B) contrast first-order and higher-order theories of consciousness. According to the latter, which L&B defend, state consciousness is a matter of subjective mental appearance: a state is only conscious if one appears to oneself to be in it. This appearance is implemented by a suitable type of higher-order representation, whose content is that one is presently in that state. By contrast, first-order theories view consciousness as a property that a mental state can have or lack all by itself, regardless of the presence of any higher-order representations. Block's theory of consciousness is an example of the first-order approach.

L&B hold that what it's like for one to undergo a conscious experience is determined by higher-order representations and not by first-order states, as Block would have it. They marshal three empirical cases in favor of this view. The first is a rare version of Charles Bonnet Syndrome, wherein otherwise normal patients have vivid experiences as of visual scenes—colors, faces, patterns, etc.—without having the neural resources that plausibly realize the relevant first-order states. L&B argue that activity in the pre-frontal cortex, where higher-order representations plausibly reside, is the best explanation of these patients' conscious experiences. Although their distinctively visual first-order states arguably lack the rich contents that are consciously experienced (on account of neurological damage), it nevertheless *seems* to the patients that they are in such states, because they represent themselves as being in them.

Block points out that, in the cases L&B describe, not all of the visual processing areas are damaged. So it may well be that the first-order representations are still there. L&B would say that damage to those regions renders it implausible that the representations would be as rich as the conscious experiences patients report. Block replies that there may well be a cognitive component to such experiences, but the cognitive element need not be a higher-order

representation; it may just be a thought with top-down influence on the partially damaged visual system. Such thoughts would be *causally involved* with conscious experiences, but their presence would not thereby *constitute* consciousness. Indeed, Block doubts that higher-order representations have the requisite richness to explain ordinary fine-grained conscious experiences. This doubt is arguably unwarranted; proponents of higher-order thought theory can appeal to comparative concepts to enrich the stock—a degree of freedom that is sufficient to capture whatever fineness of grain is needed.

L&B's second argument begins with the oft-made observation that peripheral vision is consciously experienced as being rich in color and other features. If it's true, as many have claimed, that the retinal and cortical resources for color processing are lacking in peripheral vision, then such experiences cannot be a matter of first-order representation. The only remaining explanation is that we ascribe richer contents to our sensory states than they actually have. Block replies by calling into question the physiological and neurocognitive premises of this argument, which constitute what he sees as a persistent myth in cognitive science. Peripheral vision, he argues, has plenty of retinal resources for processing color, and, at the cortical level, well-known spatial and temporal integration effects can explain how rich percepts can be generated on the basis of sparse input.

Finally, L&B discuss experiments that deal with so-called “phenomenal overflow.” These are cases in which subjects' performance is, in detection-theoretic terms, identical in two separate conditions, whereas their subjective reports regarding visibility differ. Since the first-order perceptual states are arguably the same in the two conditions, explaining the difference seems to require appealing to a metacognitive process that traffics in higher-order representations. And if the difference between the two conditions is a difference in the *conscious experiences* that subjects undergo, then such higher-order representations are precisely what accounts for the consciousness of those experiences. Block resists the final premise, arguing that there is no non-question-begging reason to believe that the metacognitive difference makes for a difference in consciousness. Overall, he does a good job of analyzing the empirical evidence that L&B present and interpreting the results in a way that fits with his view.

## 5 Conclusion

This volume is a good resource for people working on consciousness, perception, attention, and the metaphysics of mind. It's not just for professionals who want a black belt in Block. There are many useful debates here for any philosopher of mind, and even a few things that can be assigned to advanced undergraduates. Students who enjoy thinking through fanciful thought experiments might also enjoy the contributions by Levin, Levine, Tye, McLaughlin, and Lee, which rely heavily on intuitions about zombies, spectrum inversion, Mary, inverted Earth, and the like. Again, major kudos to the editors for putting together such a fun and illuminating volume.