



Mental Quality, Valence, and Intuition: Comments on Machery

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M.E.R.G. Workshop: **Attributions
of Consciousness**



I. Mental Quality and Valence

- Edouard's results (partly with Justin Sytsma) are very striking, and tell us much about the way ordinary people seem to think about subjective states.
- Nonetheless, I want to urge that the folk may, after all, think about such states not only in terms of valence, but also in terms of conscious mental qualities.
- And I'll raise in that connection a couple of general methodological concerns about the relation of intuitions to theory.

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- Folk participants regard a robot as seeing a red object that it manipulates, but not as feeling pain on receiving an electric shock.
- Let's look at that initial study before turning to the valence hypothesis. Edouard notes in an article that reports some of this work that one might urge that 'seeing red' might be equivocal, referring either to (1) detecting a perceptible property, or to (2) having some conscious experience.
- Feeling pain is sometimes (e.g., D. M. Armstrong) conceived of as a perception—as perceiving an apparent bodily condition. But even if that's so, the detection reading is more inviting for seeing red, and the experiential-state reading for feeling pain.

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- So perhaps the folk use a detection reading to answer the 'seeing red' question, and so say the robot sees red, but use the conscious-experience reading to answer the 'feeling pain' question, and so deny that the robot feels pain.
- That would show only that the folk think robots lack conscious experiences. (I'll get to the other results in a moment.)
- Edouard rejects this interpretation of those initial results (ps 151: 309-311), arguing that if 'seeing red' were equivocal, the folk would split between 'yes' and 'no' about whether the robot sees red. But it's natural to prefer saying 'yes', and so to choose a reading with that result.

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- Edouard notes that folk participants who denied the robot sees red explained that *not* by invoking experiential notions such as qualia, but by saying that *only humans can see things*. But that may just reflect a belief that robots lack experiential states—though *expressed in folk terms*. I'll come back to this issue about choice of terms.
- Edouard also urges that the equivocation interpretation is ad hoc unless we explain why the folk diverge from those with a philosophy background. I'll return to this.
- As with denying the robot feels pain, the folk deny it feels anger. But though they say it *sees red*, they *deny it can smell a banana*. Why is that?

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- Edouard urges that it's because smelling a banana resembles pain and anger in *having a valence*: The first is nice and the other two unpleasant. By contrast, seeing red is valence neutral.
- What matters on this *valence interpretation* is whether the folk see the robot as being in a state that has valence—not as being in a state with conscious mental qualities.
- The third study is meant to be the clincher: The folk take the robot to be able to smell isoamyl acetate, presumably thought by them to be valence neutral. *Robots can be in valence-neutral states, but not in states with valence*. Valence—not mental quality—makes the difference.

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- Edouard's explanation is that "people tend to believe that only living creatures have likes and dislikes." And that, he urges, supports "the proposal that the folk conceive of subjective states as states with an associated valence" (318), rather than conscious qualitative character.
- The neutral-smell finding makes it hard to discount the crucial role of valence—and that's a novel, highly striking finding.
- Still, I want to raise a couple of questions about Edouard's explanation. For one thing, the folk may well ascribe sensitivity to valence—likes and dislikes—to *more elaborate robots*; some scifi robots seem even to fall in love.

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- Edouard's robot is "a relatively simple robot built at a state university." Even if such a robot isn't valence sensitive, an elaborate Star Wars edition might be.
- We'd need further studies to see if the folk would say that a fancier robot that, e.g., *likes* bananas can also *smell* one. But for now, let's revisit the *equivocation hypothesis* I sketched a moment ago.
- On that hypothesis, the folk do conceive of subjective states as exhibiting what we in philosophy call *conscious mental qualities*—e.g., mental red or painfulness—but whether they think something sees or smells a particular thing is equivocal as between *detection* and *experiential state*.

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- If the folk can use either a detection or an experiential reading in understanding questions about whether a robot sees or smells something, what determines which reading they'll use?
What tilts them toward a detection reading in some cases and an experiential reading in others?
- Edouard's results suggest that when the folk think of a state as having valence, that by itself invites an experiential reading, as against a (mere) detection reading.
- It's not that the folk conceive of subjective states simply in terms of valence. Rather, valence induces a tendency to think about detection in terms of conscious qualities.

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- Valence on this hypothesis is still what determines which way the folk will answer: just detection or experientially.
But that doesn't show that the folk don't think of subjective states as having the conscious mental qualities that seem to some to animate the "hard problem."
- The likes and dislikes relevant here seem to have a close tie to mental quality—e.g., the difference for one between the smell of bananas and that of isoamyl acetate.
And not all valence does—we like and dislike things as distant from mental quality as mathematical theories.
- That reinforces the idea that valence here reflects folk beliefs about mental qualities.

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II. Intuition and Theory

- Still, we must meet Edouard's challenge to the equivocation hypothesis about why people with a background in philosophy answer differently from the folk. What tilts them toward an experiential reading even when valence is neutral?
- It's important that they have an easy vocabulary for describing mental qualities—whereas talking explicitly about mental qualities is a bit awkward for those without some relevant theoretical background.

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- This mild discomfort (often even for those in perceptual psychology) is due to our using the very same terms for mental qualities as we use for the corresponding perceptible properties of physical stimuli.
- We use 'red' and 'banana smell', e.g., both for things we perceive and for experiences we have (even without those stimuli).
- This appropriation of terms for perceptible properties to refer to corresponding mental qualities is sometimes exploited to argue for intentionalism about perception—denying mental qualities and seeing all perceiving on a detection model. But such theories aside, this double use of terms can be awkward for nonspecialists.

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- So why, on the equivocation hypothesis, would those with a philosophy background use the experiential reading for robots' seeing red—whereas those without such a background adopt a detection reading?
- If everybody has both readings available, why would background make a difference?
- Those with a philosophy background are comfortable talking about and thinking in terms of mental qualities—whereas the folk are less so.
So those with a philosophy background default to an experiential reading, and the folk go for the easier (and weaker) detection reading unless valence pulls them into the experiential reading.

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- This accommodates the pivotal role of valence revealed by Edouard's studies. But it suggests the folk do countenance conscious mental qualities—despite some discomfort in talking about them.
- Valence tilts them toward an experiential reading—which describes the situation in terms of conscious mental qualities.
- Why would valence have this effect?
It must be that *the folk tend to connect valence with mental quality* (at least for the relevant type of valence).
- But it's unclear what studies might *confirm* that folk connection—since asking about the connection may require *explaining the very theoretical issues under consideration*.

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- If a connection does hold for the folk between valence and mental quality, it's a folk-theoretical connection.
- Intuitions, both of the folk and claimed in philosophy, are single judgments. But folk theory, like all theory, is about connections among things—and so reflects connections among relevant beliefs.
- And questions well-suited to elicit individual beliefs may work less well in eliciting folk-theoretical connections—since that would often require broaching theoretical issues and would thereby distort the results.
- This echoes an antipathy that sometimes emerges in philosophical work between appeals to intuition and appeals to theory.

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- Consider Kripke: “[S]ome philosophers think that something’s having intuitive content is very inconclusive evidence in favor of it. I think it is very heavy evidence in favor of anything, myself. I really don't know, in a way, what more conclusive evidence one can have about anything, ultimately speaking” (Naming and Necessity, 42).
- But intuitions shouldn't be able to overturn, in a quasi-foundationalist way, compelling theoretical accounts—especially since, as experimental work often shows, claimed intuitions may just attractively package otherwise undefended theoretical claims.
- Elsewhere (2010) I've argued the intuition about quality inversion does just that.

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- Studies like Edouard's elicit beliefs from those (relatively) naïve in philosophy—beliefs less likely to be corrupted by theory.
- But since such studies won't always reveal connections among beliefs, they may not uncover contamination of folk views by theory—whether folk or other theory—since that's reflected not by single beliefs but in the connections among beliefs.
- So it may be best just to compare one theory against another—along with claimed intuitions—and deny intuitions any special, foundational role. Otherwise we risk giving too much away to appeals to intuition, which often, as with the hard problem, blocks both theorizing and argument.

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Summary

- Edouard's results show that valence is undeniably important. But its role may be due to a folk-theoretical connection that encourages an experiential reading when valence is thought to figure.
- Such studies may be better at revealing single folk beliefs than theoretical ties among them—whether folk or otherwise. So such studies are unlikely to replace the direct evaluation of theories, together with whatever intuitions are claimed for them.

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**Thank you for
your attention**

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Afterword

- Edouard urged in discussion that we need a positive reason to think the folk use 'sees red' equivocally—and so countenance mental qualities. That can be tested.
- See what they say when robot and person are described as erroneously detecting something they seem to see as red. If they split on robot and person, they're using 'sees red' equivocally, and likely taking the robot to lack the internal states needed only for the experiential reading.
- Still, we should determine what occurs in human perceiving by evaluating theories about that, not by folk or other intuitions.