

the production of mindscapes

a comprehensive theory of landscape experience

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Chapter 14 Conclusions and discussion (p245-247)

14.1 The production of mindscapes

Mindscapes are produced by subjects. A mindscape – an experience of landscape – is not a passive encountering of a given world, but an active construction created by the complex neural processing of matterscape stimuli that results in an experience that supervenes on a dynamic core of cortical neural activity. The qualities of mindscapes, higher-order products of active brains, depend greatly (but not exclusively) on the properties of the incoming matterscape stimuli, the properties of the appraisal mechanism and the properties of the mental concepts employed. Moreover, mindscapes are symbolic constructions, since the sensations resulting from incoming matterscape stimuli are purely symbolic with respect to the properties of matterscape.

The idea that mindscapes are precise images of matterscape, or possibly precise perceptual images of matterscape with some valuations and feelings added, is completely false. Even the idea that landscape experiences are representations of matterscapes that have qualities corresponding with matterscape properties is not justified. Landscape experiences are subjective presentations that are created out of stimuli that affect our senses, being natural signs of matterscapes and taken automatically for granted as natural signs by the interpreting subject. On most occasions we use those presentations as representations. This behavioural inclination does not, however, turn the presentations into representations. It is just our predisposition to employ presentations this way simply because it is the only choice we have in order to cope with the world (and this is metaphorically speaking, because it is not really a choice but an inclination). And on many occasions it works well enough to cope with the world. This may seem to be miraculous, but it is less of a miracle than the miracle of us being alive: if the brains of our ancestors had in the course of evolution developed in such a way that their presentations were not good enough to cope to a certain extent with the world, our ancestors would have become extinct and we would not exist.

Mindscapes are not social constructions. Social phenomena do not experience; only individual subjects do. Mindscapes may be greatly affected by social influences that are constituted by fluxes of creating and interpreting public expressions. These processes result in alterations of mental concepts. The fact that mindscapes are socially influenced does not make them social constructions.

We cannot conclude from the fact that mindscapes are subjective and symbolic constructions that these constructions are fully contingent. Of course, in the end one might argue that everything is contingent. It is at least conceivable that the big bang could have been different and that the universe resulting from it could have had different qualities. It is conceivable that biological evolution could have resulted in humans having senses with properties other than our senses. But since we know that our senses are the way they are, there is no more contingency in the way our senses convert stimuli into sensations. And given that the external world has particular properties, there is no or hardly any contingency in human subjects creating particular mental concepts, such as mental concepts that discriminate between up and down or mental concepts that discriminate between water and non-water. Given that within contemporary Western culture nature is often promoted as beautiful and valuable, there is not much contingency in an average subject having preferences for natural landscapes, as opposed to a subject who grew up in a medieval European society.

On the other hand, some aspects of mindscapes are contingent in the sense that these aspects are not predictable for us. Whether a particular subject likes landscapes with water or not is contingent for us, since we do not know the past experiences of matterscape and public expressions of this subject and the way these experiences have affected his networks of mental concepts and his emotional appraisal mechanism. Perhaps at a very young age the subject experienced the trauma of almost drowning in a lake and has now forgotten the event, while an association between water and fear has been established in his appraisal mechanism and evokes a fear response to landscapes with water. Our capacities to predict the qualities of somebody's mindscape are seriously limited because we cannot observe somebody's past experiences of matterscapes and public expressions.

Moreover, we cannot conclude from the fact that mindscapes are subjective and symbolic constructions that these constructions are fully under voluntary control. We cannot deliberately control the subcortical neural processes that initiate emotional responses. We cannot choose to construct an experience of a lake out of matterscape stimuli coming from a tree. We cannot prevent ourselves from discriminating between trees and houses. On the other hand, some aspects of mindscape can be affected by voluntary action. For example, we can choose to pay attention to a part of a stimulus field.

In section 2.7 the question was raised whether matterscape, powerscape and mindscape belong to different ontological categories. The arguments made at various places in this dissertation provide an answer. Matterscape – the landscape as it exists in physical reality – and mindscape – the landscape as it is experienced – belong to different ontological categories. As argued in section 8.8, experience is a higher-order property of a particular type of neural process, one that involves new ontological qualities such as subjectivity. Experience is constituted by material processes, but is a supervening phenomenon that exists on a new ontological level. Hence, matterscape and mindscape belong to different ontological categories. Does powerscape – the landscape as it exists in social reality and that consists of implicit and explicit rules that regulate the behaviour of people, – belong to another distinctive ontological category? The arguments made in section 10.6 suggest that this is indeed the case. Powerscape is not reducible to the rules that are inherent in series of public expressions and in the minds of people belonging to a society. Powerscape is a higher-order property that supervenes on those rules. Thus, powerscape (a cultural phenomenon) belongs to an ontological category distinctive from the ontological categories to which matterscape and mindscape belong.