

Session 6: The Objectivity of Mind

Mark Johnston (2007), 'Objective Mind and the Objectivity of Our Minds' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 75, No. 2, pp. 233-268.

Producers of Presence

On the standard picture of phenomenal consciousness, the phenomenal properties of an experience are *psychological* properties.

On the standard view of the relation between consciousness and reality, most of being is absolutely wasted, for only an infinitesimally small fraction of what exists is ever present, i.e., ever discloses or reveals some aspect of its nature. On this view, when the last individual consciousness ceases to be, the very local phenomenon of presence will end. The lights will have gone out, all over the universe, never to go on again. (2007, 234)

The standard picture portrays *us* (or our brains) as somehow responsible for the qualitative aspects of experience: Presence is mind-dependent, "we take presence to be dependent on our mental operations" (2007, 251). What does Johnston mean by 'presence'?

Perhaps the best way to bring presence into view is to begin with perception. When one sees one's dogs running in the front yard, the whole content of the perceptual experience is of the dogs and their running being present in a certain way, a way that discloses something of the nature of the dogs and their running. THERE the dogs are, immediately available as objects of attention and demonstration, and as top- ics of one's further thought and talk. (2007, 233)

The presence of the objects of experience is the way their nature is manifest or disclosed phenomenally, i.e. visually, acoustically, etc. when we experience them. Johnston here seems to be relying on a transparency observation: when we introspect we only find the objects of experience and the specific way they appear to us.

The problem with representational theories of consciousness

According to the representationalist you could have an experience of a tree (i.e. a state that represents a tree) in the absence of any tree.

1. But what then is the relation between the tree itself and the experience of a tree?
2. And how can having an experience of a tree explain the fact that it is a way for the tree to be manifest or disclosed phenomenally?

The main problem of representationalist theories of consciousness is that they make the presence of objects (the way their nature is manifest or disclosed phenomenally) a matter of having 'experiences', mental states or episodes that are independent from these objects themselves. (See the 'historical precedent' at the end of this handout.)

Samplers of Presence

The 'outrageous hypothesis' is that we are Samplers of Presence.

Here is a way of providing empirical confirmation of the hypothesis that presence is not mind-dependent. Stare at something in your immediate field of vision. Attend to how that thing looks. Now without moving your head in any direction, just close your eyes, and consider the hypothesis that it still looks THAT way, the very way it looked when you had your eyes open. You can confirm this hypothesis by now opening your eyes. Associated with this confirmation may be a certain metaphysical gestalt shift in which we experience our minds as "out there already." (2007, 252)

Modes of Presentation

We can distinguish three different kinds of modes of presentation:

1. perceptual; 2. bodily sensory; 3. intellectual.

Perhaps the most familiar one is intellectual: according to Frege, these are the senses ('modes of presentations') expressed by sentences and words. Frege assumes that such modes of presentations are objective and mind-independent: they are the way we can come to think about the world or things in the world.

When one apprehends or thinks a thought one does not create it but only comes to stand in a certain relation, which is different from seeing a thing or having an idea, to what already existed beforehand. (G. Frege, 'The Thought', 1st footnote)

Just as Frege thinks of thinking a thought as an intellectual act of grasping something-to-be-grasped, we can think of perceiving as a sensory act of grasping something-to-be-grasped. This is the model Johnston uses. Individual experience becomes a kind of 'sensory grasping' of a qualitative, phenomenal reality out there.

Exercise: reflect on your current visual experience, and consider how it is perspectival: it centres on a point just behind your eyes. Now imagine stepping in and out of that point, e.g. by moving your head sideways back and forth. There are indefinitely many such points that are unoccupied by a head with eyes. Why not think that the world is visually presented to those points just as much?

This gives rise to an objectivism about phenomenal consciousness:

All the modes of presentation of each existing thing, be they intellectual or sensory modes, all the possible ways of thinking and sensing each such thing, come into being with the things themselves, whether or not there are any individual minds to sample these modes of presentation, i.e. to access them in individual mental acts. (2007, 235)

A so-called subjective mental act is, then, to be thought of as an act of accessing a mode of presentation of the items that the act thereby is about. (2007, 245)

Johnston refers to this totality of objective modes of presentation as 'Objective Mind'. Why should we think of this collection as a mind?

If we are indeed Samplers of Presence, then the representational theory of consciousness is exploiting a kind of *introjective error* (I borrow this idea from Mark Kalderon): we mistake an aspect of the objective world for an aspect of some kind of 'subjective experience', where the latter is a confused idea that arises from just this mistake.

What are our mental lives?

If the phenomenal character of our perceptual, bodily sensory, and intellectual lives is wholly determined by objective modes of presentation (i.e. the appearances and qualities of the things in the world, including our bodies), then what is left of our own, individual mind?

Our hypothesis has it that our respective mental lives are just particular idiosyncratic histories of accessing modes of presentation. What we accessed were objects presenting in this or that way; our mental lives are parasitic on this ubiquitous fact of presentation. We are not Producers of Presence; that is, we are not beings whose psychological operations are the absolute preconditions of presence. Everything that fills our minds, the whole content of our minds, is the contribution of the objects. When we speak of consciousness, we are systematically getting hold of the wrong end of the stick, the basic reality is not the fact of consciousness, understood as the inner achievement of a mind. It is a fact of the continuous and multifaceted disclosure of objects, which certain evolved animals are able to access. (2007, 254)

An historical precedent

The Oxford philosopher John Cook-Wilson wrote the following in a 1904 letter to the Cambridge psychologist G.F. Stout:

Note upon a certain confusion to which we are liable in regard to the conception of appearance

If we perceive some property of an object, there is presupposed on the one hand the property of the object as existing in its own account whether we perceive it or not; and as distinct from this, our act of perceiving or recognizing the nature of this property.

This latter, the subjective act of ours, is sometimes spoken of from the side of the object as the *appearance* of the object to us. This 'appearance' then gets distinguished from the object, and that in itself is justified in so far as our subjective act of recognition of the object's nature is not the same kind as that nature. But next the *appearance*, though properly the *appearing* of the object, gets to be looked upon as itself an object and the immediate object of consciousness, and being already, as we have seen, distinguished from the subject and related to our subjectivity, becomes, so to say, a merely subjective 'object'—'appearance' in that sense. And so, as *appearance* of the object, it has now to be represented not as the object but as some phenomenon caused in our consciousness by the object. Thus for the true appearance (= appearing) to us of the *object* is substituted through the 'objectification' of the appearing as *appearance*, the appearing to us of an appearance, the appearing of a phenomenon caused in us by the object. (The thing to emphasize on the contrary is that the so-called appearance is the appearing of the *object*, that is, we have the nature of the object before us and not only some affection of our consciousness produced by it.)

(John Cook-Wilson, *Statement and Inference* 1926, 796-7)