

Objects of Perception and Dependence

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Introduction

What is consciousness? Although it is possible to offer explanations of consciousness in terms of the physical, some of the important (if not *defining*) qualities of consciousness escape easy explanation. This is something Joseph Levine calls the *explanatory gap* (Levine, 1983). That which escapes easy physicalist explanation—which is to say, that which lies *beyond* the explanatory gap to express easily in physical terms—can be (at the present) expressed best *only* in terms of itself, which is to say, *phenomenally*.¹ John Searle gives a picture of consciousness in the following way: “By consciousness I simply mean those subjective states of awareness or sentience that begin when one wakes in the morning and continue throughout the period that one is awake until one falls into a dreamless sleep, into a coma, or dies, or is otherwise, as they say, unconscious” (Block 230). I think this picture suffices for my purposes in this paper.

Is consciousness analyzable? Are there parts to consciousness? It seems to me at the very least, that phenomenal consciousness can be expressed in a certain logical *form* which *formally* has three different parts: *subject*, *object*, and *relation*. The form is captured well by sentences such as

¹Frank Jackson (Jackson, 1982) and Thomas Nagel (Nagel, 1974) offer a good picture of how physical terms fail to appropriately express the phenomenal aspects of consciousness.

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“Jane kicked the ball,” which do not themselves express consciousness. The fact consciousness can be expressed in this form does not guarantee the separate identity of the three formal elements. Nevertheless I think that these three elements do correspond to three separate *things* in consciousness. Of these, the phenomenal objects of consciousness (in particular, the objects of *perception*) shall be my focus. Do they *exist*? Or, if we express our question differently, do they have *fundamental* or *dependent* existence?

I shall argue that objects of perception are, at the very least, not dependent on subject minds for their existence. As a result, I will argue that these objects of perception do not of necessity cease to exist when they are not being perceived. I will further argue that this view is qualitatively parsimonious because it does not require the addition of certain ontological entities (mysterious grounding relations of a certain kind) to our frameworks whose existence is as much in question as the continued existence of objects of perception *outside* our perception of them. In the process I will also suggest that the Idealist conception of these objects of perception is vulnerable to self-contradiction.

I. Analysis of Consciousness

Phenomenal consciousness² appears to be something that can be expressed in the form of subject-relation-object, a form I shall call *Rso*. Someone holding to George Berkeley’s brand of idealism might say in a sentence that “God perceives all ideas,” and it is clear that he would be grammatically distinguishing in this sentence *subject*, *object*, and *relation*. Other historical examples where consciousness is expressed in terms of these three elements can be given.³ One need not be limited to the specific philosophical views of these persons either in order to express consciousness in *Rso* form. A materialist may do the same. There is therefore

²There is a resemblance between my use of this term and Ned Block’s term *P-consciousness*, but I do not say they are entirely identical. My use of the term is certainly based in part on Block’s use of his term (Block, 1995).

³Such examples include: J. Locke, 1689: “Whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding, that I call idea” (Essay II.8.8); I. Kant, 1787: “The undetermined object of an empirical intuition is entitled *appearance*” (*Critique of Pure Reason* A 20/B 34); B. Russell, 1910-1911: “I say that I am *acquainted* with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e. when I am directly aware of the object itself ... When we ask what are the kinds of objects with which we are acquainted, the first and most obvious example is *sense-data*. When I see a colour or hear a noise, I have direct acquaintance with the colour or the noise” (Russell 108-109).

at least a *formal*, if not *material*,⁴ distinction possible in consciousness. The distinction, when applied to consciousness, distinguishes between a *subject mind*, *objects of consciousness*, and *cognitive relations* (thinking, perceiving, etc).

Materialist J.C.C. Smart makes use of the *Rso* form to talk about consciousness while viewing consciousness as something to be understood entirely in terms of brain states. At the same time, Smart is firmly opposed to the view that objects of consciousness (such as yellowy-orange “after-images”) actually exist. As he puts it:

I am not arguing that the after-image is a brain process, but that the experience of having an after-image is a brain-process. ... There is, in a sense, no such thing as an after-image or a sense-datum, though there is such a thing as the experience of having an image, and this experience is described indirectly in material object language, not in phenomenal language, for there is no such thing. (Smart 150-151)

Broadly-speaking, there are three ways in which objects of consciousness might be said not to exist: One way requires a denial that phenomenal consciousness can actually be expressed in *Rso* form at all; however, I think it obvious that it *can* and that it *is* expressed in *Rso* form in ordinary language. Another way in which these objects may be denied existence is to deny that they have separate *identity* from other aspects of consciousness. Without denying the *formal* distinctions in consciousness, possible *material* distinctions would have to be denied. The third way in which the objects may be denied existence is to deny that they are independent existences.

Briefly, the second of these ways is to be explained as follows: Although formal distinctions can distinguish a subject from an object, and these in turn from a relation, nothing requires the *actual contents* of an *Rso*-form proposition to have separate identities. For example, the subject and object of an *Rso*-form proposition may have real identity. More exotic examples are imaginable.⁵ Thus, one way to deny that objects of consciousness exist

⁴By “material” here I do not mean to reference *physical matter*. I am simply distinguishing between the logical *form* of an expression and its *actual particular content* (i.e. *matter*). It is not to be understood as a commitment to Aristotelian hylomorphism.

⁵For example, one may imagine a situation where the subject, object, and relation are *all* postulated as identical, such that in a proposition of the form *Rso*, R, S and O are all the very same entity; I do not say that such a situation *ever* holds true in reality, only that we may express a sentence of the form *Rso* wherein we assert the perfect co-identity of the three elements, without violating the *form* of the sentence (*Rso*).

is to deny that they are separate *in identity* from subject minds, or from the relations of thinking, perceiving, etc.

When someone usually says, like Smart, that objects of consciousness *do not exist*, I think it unlikely that they actually *mean* that they do not exist, unless they wish to be wrong: they clearly *do* exist. Contrary to W.V.O. Quine (Quine, 1948), I agree with Jonathan Schaffer that questions of *fundamentality* are more interesting to ontology than questions of *existence* (Schaffer, 2009). The existence of many things which traditionally has been doubted (such as numbers, meanings, universals, possible worlds, etc) is not *really* in question; rather, Schaffer would say that their status as fundamental or dependent existences is what we really wish to explain. The third way in which objects of consciousness may be denied existence is therefore really to be understood as a claim about their metaphysical dependence on other things for existence. The objects of consciousness may be materially (not just formally) distinguished from the subject minds or relations of consciousness, and still be denied ‘existence’ in the limited sense where their fundamentality is being called into question. In order to better understand this view, it is important to understand how *grounding* works, and what things have been said, historically or presently, about what grounds the objects of consciousness.

II. Presentation of the Notion of Grounding

There are two broad ways in which a thing X may be said to be grounded in a thing or collection of things Y, and I choose to call the two ways *analytic* and *synthetic* respectively. Analytic grounding is to be understood as the dependence had by wholes on their constituent parts, without which their identity would be injured. Synthetic grounding is to be understood as all other forms of dependence. In particular, synthetic grounding differs from analytic grounding in the fact that a thing X is not X because of some thing or things Y (which ground X’s existence) forming part of X’s constitution, *by definition*. If that were the case, X would be analytically dependent on Y. Kit Fine gives an example of the analytic kind of grounding when he suggests that “The ball is red” and “The ball is round” *ground* the fact “The ball is red and round” (Fine 46). Analytic grounding is therefore rather straightforward. Examples of the synthetic kind of grounding are by contrast, more mysterious.

An example: Schaffer believes that “there is only one fundamental entity—the *whole concrete cosmos*—from which all else exists by abstraction” (Schaffer 361). This appears to be a synthetic kind of grounding. None of the parts of the cosmos have the entire cosmos as one of their *own* parts.

Therefore, they do not depend analytically on the cosmos. Cases where it is said that some whole must have existential priority to its parts are examples of synthetic grounding because the parts depend on the whole in a certain way that is not analytic. Synthetic grounding is not *limited* to this. For example, John Locke teaches a different kind of synthetic grounding when he says: “The *idea* ... to which we give the general name substance, being nothing, but the supposed, but unknown support of those qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist, *sine re substante*, without something to support them, we call that support *substantia*” (Locke, Essay II.23.2). Locke seems to be saying that without a substance underlying them, the qualities (primary and secondary) found in physical objects could not subsist on their own, independently. This I do not think is an example of *wholes grounding their parts*, but of a certain *something* grounding the existence of an entirely *different* group of things.

III. Grounding and Objects of Perception

Phenomenal objects of perception in particular are often said to have no continued existence beyond their being perceived. This can be claimed on either an analytic or synthetic grounding basis, but I consider the former to be most problematic. I don't think it likely that anyone really believes that the objects are analytically dependent on the *entirety* of consciousness. Likewise, I do not think anyone really believes that they are analytically dependent on subject minds. There are some who *do* (or rather, *could*) say that objects of perception are analytically dependent on a certain *property* defined *relationally* (by recourse to the perceiving relation). Such characterizations seem to really be faults of confusing language. Wilfrid Sellars seems to best illustrate what I mean by *confusing language* permitting such analytic grounding claims:

Being a sense datum, or sensum, is a relational property of the item that is sensed. To refer to an item which is sensed in a way which does not entail that it is sensed, it is necessary to use some other locution. *Sensibile* has the disadvantage that it implies that sensed items could exist without being sensed, and this is a matter of controversy among sense-datum theorists. *Sense content* is, perhaps, as neutral a term as any. (Sellars 128)

Sellars defines “sense content” as any phenomenal item which can be sensed but which *hypothetically* could exist without its being sensed. Clearly, sense content is not *analytically* dependent on being sensed. By contrast, it seems that “sense data” (as Sellars uses the term) is to be understood as

sense content *in the process of being sensed*, such that “Being a sense datum ... is a *relational property* of the item that is sensed” (emphasis added). Sellars does a good job helping us distinguish the object of perception *qua* object of perception, from the object of perception *in the process of being perceived*. This is the same as the difference between a ball and a ball *in the process of being kicked*; the second instance describes Px, while the first describes X only, absent P. Removing P does not injure X’s identity (because it is *synthetic* to X), though it might injure the identity of some thing Y *defined* in terms of Px.

It is possible, I suppose, to deny the existence of anything like a “sense content” which remains after subtracting the perceiving relation from some whole (i.e. the “sense datum” in Sellars’ sense). This is problematic, however. Either the object of perception is *identical* to the perceiving relation (which explains why the absence of the latter is the same as the absence of the former), or it is but *composed* in part of the latter. If that is so, a residue is to be expected. Is the residue not more appropriately an object of perception? If not, what is the character of this residue that we may discover it upon analyzing phenomenal objects of perception?

It generally seems more accurate to say that claims about the grounding of objects of perception are generally synthetic grounding claims. It is possible, for example, to say that subject minds *ground* objects of perception by means of, or in necessary conjunction with, the perceiving relation. The grounding might be partial: perhaps objects of perception are also partly grounded in physical stimuli. Perhaps objects of perception are synthetically grounded on the *whole* of consciousness. Perhaps, in turn, the whole of consciousness is synthetically grounded on physical states (like in epiphenomenalism). It seems to me that in such a situation, there is still an analytic grounding of the whole of consciousness on its phenomenal parts. Consider Schaffer’s cosmos: It grounds its own parts synthetically, but it seems likewise true that if some or all of its parts did not exist, neither would the same cosmos exist. Perhaps wholes are *always* grounded analytically on their parts, even when parts are also synthetically grounded in the wholes to which they form part. As an effect of this fact, we cannot tell if the parts of a whole could exist *on their own* in the imaginary situation where the whole does not synthetically ground the parts. If we wish to say that an object of perception could not exist on its own (without subject minds or perceiving relations), *even if the whole did not ground its parts*, then we seem to be saying that the object of perception is *grounded* on the subject mind by means of the perceiving relation. Thus it’s likely that claims about the whole grounding the parts of consciousness also make the objects of perception grounded on the subject mind perceiving them.

Let it be supposed that the subject mind does ground the objects. If so, it either grounds them by means of the perceiving relation, or by means of some other grounding relation, which exists *alongside* the perceiving relation but is not the same as it. A few positions can be given in association with these two views:

1a. *To be perceived is to be, and to be is to be perceived.*

1b. *To be perceived is to be, but to be is not always to be perceived.*

2a. *To be grounded is to be, and to be is to be grounded.*

2b. *To be grounded is to be, but to be is not always to be grounded.*

3a. *To be perceived is to be grounded, and to be grounded is to be perceived.*

3b. *To be perceived is to be grounded, but to be grounded is not always to be perceived.*

Idealism generally seems to hold positions 1a, 2a, and 3a, because the latter two seem to follow from the first. Non-idealists instead seem to hold positions 1b, 2b, and 3b, although only the first seems *characteristic* of their non-idealism. A non-idealist allows for reference without perception. Although some non-idealists might hold that causal connections are necessary for reference, this is not universal among all non-idealists. Surely David Lewis' modal realism is to be understood as the most *extreme* variety of this: his possible worlds are not causally connected (even indirectly) to our actual world *at all*, and yet we refer to them and their contents still. It is conceivable that a non-idealist might believe in 2a or 3a, but probably not both at the same time. Position 2a is not at odds with position 1b, if it is allowed that grounding relations exist which do not need to exist *alongside* or be perception. Position 3a is not at odds with position 1b if it is allowed that some things exist which are not grounded on anything else.

IV. Refutation of Idealism

Let us take *idealism* as the view which holds 1a, 2a, and 3a. At a glance, George Berkeley *seems* to hold these three views. He says of objects of perception that "the existence of an idea consists in being perceived" (Berkeley, Treatise I.2) and that "their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence, out of the minds or thinking things which

perceive them” (I.3). Berkeley also does not think it possible to refer to anything except if it is not presently being experienced; on these grounds, he claims the concept of “*matter, or corporeal substance, involves a contradiction in it*” (I.9). Yet he also seems to provide an exception for “*spirit, or that which perceives*” (I.7) because he thinks it absurd that spirit (mind or self) could be itself an idea (I.27); as a result of this, Berkeley is in fact *weakening* the thesis of 1a. This inconsistency ought to destroy Berkeley’s idealism: no longer can he say that a thing cannot be referred unless it is being perceived, because it is clear that he himself requires the possibility of such a thing of necessity. A more consistent idealism is, however, imaginable. Let us assume such an idealism, one where even the existence of the perceiving mind depends on its being perceived, presumably by itself.⁶

If the perceiving relation is the same as the grounding relation for an idealist, one must wonder why its grounding nature is not entirely self-evident. What I mean by this is that, look as I might, I do not discover in the perceiving relation something which tells me, of itself, that *it* (the perceiving relation) is also a grounding relation. One particularly problematic truth is that, while I can imagine the perceiving relation without it being a grounding relation, I cannot imagine the perceiving relation without it having the nature of making manifest to my mind the “what is it like” (or essence) of the objects of perception. On the other hand, I can imagine the essence-revealing aspect of the perceiving relation without any sort of grounding nature. There is an *explanatory gap* here for anyone who insists that the perceiving relation is the same, in some sense, as a grounding relation. It is the same sort of problem as the regular explanatory gap in the hard problem of consciousness. Given some X, if Y is denied, it seems impossible to conceive of X with its identity intact; but it is conceivable to think of X’s identity intact without Z, while explaining X in terms of Z seems incomplete at best. If we replace X with *consciousness*, Y with *the analyzable phenomenal parts of consciousness*, and Z with *physical states*, we see how this holds true with the hard problem of consciousness. But we may just as well replace X with *the perceiving relation*, Y with *its essence-disclosing aspect*, and Z with a *grounding nature*. There is an explanatory gap here too.

An idealist may resist this, much the same as an identity theorist (like J.C.C. Smart) may strongly resist being told that there is an explanatory gap in accounting for phenomenal aspects of consciousness. The idealist

⁶Examples of such a consistent Idealism can be given: for example, J.G. Fichte, 1794: “*The self posits itself*” (*Science of Knowledge* I 96).

may want to assert an *identity theory* regarding grounding and perceiving, as well as *being*. But a non-idealist would resist such a triple identification for obvious reasons (it would require the non-idealist to become an idealist).

If this critique of Idealism is fair, the idealist might perhaps admit that indeed, the grounding aspect of the perceiving relation is not itself *given* or *made known* to the mind in perception. If that is so, then is the grounding aspect not itself an imperceivable entity whose existence is independent of being perceived? The idealist may offer several ways around this problem. For example, she could say that the grounding relation exists so long as it is *thought*, by means of mental representations (such as definite or indefinite descriptions). If the idealist allows this, then the existence of the grounding aspect still depends on its being thought, and it is clearly not always *actively* thought.

If the grounding relation can subsist without being actively perceived or thought, idealism abandons its consistency; all of a sudden, entities are allowed to exist without being grounded on the mind's activities. If instead idealism retains its consistency, then the grounding relation must at times *not exist*. But this produces trouble for the idealist in other ways. How can the objects of perception depend on minds for existence when the dependence relation is *itself* not in existence? Either way, idealism seems to lead to self-contradictions.

V. Parsimony Preserved

A non-idealist may employ an argument from skepticism against the continued existence of objects of perception beyond their being perceived. A similar argument from skepticism may be made, however, against the existence whatsoever of a grounding aspect to the perceiving relation, or against the existence of a grounding relation apart from it, working in necessary conjunction with it. A grounding relation is being supposed in order to make sense of how objects of perception are unable to continue existing beyond our perception of them; but said grounding relation seems to be *as unknown* as the (possible) continued existence of the objects of perception beyond our perception of them.

It is sometimes thought that a good ontological theory is more *parsimonious* than its opponents: it requires less ontological entities than competing theories do to explain all that there is. There are, as David Lewis says, two kinds of parsimony: qualitative and quantitative:

A doctrine is qualitatively parsimonious if it keeps down the number of fundamentally different kinds of entity: if it posits sets alone rather than sets and unreduced

numbers, or particles alone rather than particles and fields, or bodies alone or spirits alone rather than both bodies and spirits. A doctrine is quantitatively parsimonious if it keeps down the number of instances of the kinds it posits; if it posits 1029 electrons rather than 1037, or spirits only for people rather than spirits for all animals. I subscribe to the general view that qualitative parsimony is good in philosophical or empirical hypothesis; but I recognize no presumption whatever in favor of quantitative parsimony. (Lewis 87)

I agree with Lewis. *Quantitative* parsimony is of minor importance (and if it ever holds importance, it is when all other things are being held equal). *Qualitative* parsimony is, however, of greatest importance. If a traditional non-idealist theory requires the existence of *new* ontological entities to explain the world, while my alternative theory requires only the continued existence of established entities beyond our perception of them, then sure, skepticism may still lay some claim on *both* theories; but one of the two seems to me to be *simpler*, more *economical* in the kinds of ontological entities which it employs. Perhaps we should accept the simpler theory based on the parsimony principle.

Conclusion

A more rigorous argumentative project could surely be undertaken to better explain and explore the problems which I have addressed in part in this paper, problems which I think exist whenever we claim that objects of perception are *grounded* on minds, or on physical states, or on anything else. In this paper, I have shown a few of the problems and offered some criticisms in the process. In no ways is my work fully exhaustive, and there remain lacunae to be filled. The main two problems that require further philosophical attention, as I see it, are: 1) How can it be demonstrated that perceiving is indeed a grounding relation, or that perceiving is always accompanied by some grounding relation? 2) How can it be shown that accepting unknown grounding relations is economically preferable to doing away with them? In the process of defending the independence of objects of perception, I hope that I have drawn some attention to these questions and the problems they pose, which I do think require further attention.

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