The "Background" Category
and Its Place in the Material World

Dwight Holbrook
School of English
Adam Mickiewicz University
Poznań, Poland

> *For the listener, who listens in the snow,*
> *And, nothing himself, beholds*
> *Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.*
>
> Wallace Stevens (1921)

Abstract

However robust the mind's cognitive strategies of objectifying and rendering in object terms conscious experience, there is nevertheless that which resists object/substantivity categorization: an exteriority that comes out of perception itself and that is here termed the "background". In seeking out, in this inquiry, the non-objectified and non-thingness part of the observed world, we must first of all distinguish this background from such misrepresentations as mere "seeming". The background – while not thing-like or detectable as data – will be defended as existing concretely and empirically to the observer, notwithstanding our objectifying and substantive way of framing our understanding of the world. It will be shown to have verifiability despite being knowable only from the first-person perspective. The aim is to demonstrate its presence by way of a number of its features, and to show that far from being a mere subjective quality, it stands as real as do spatial objects – or whatever arises spatially as a discretizable information source in the empirical world.

1. The Concept of the Background

That which appears outside our subjectivity and the abstract domain of ideas is commonly labeled the objective world. It is a world in which things are stipulated to belong – whatever can be perceived or configured as things, whether it be objects, substances, information sources, data, the once postulated ether, or something else. And where we witness a dearth of such observational input, an absence is ascribed, a no-thing here or a no-thing there. One need not conclude from this, however,

that such neat dichotomizing must necessarily exhaust the possibilities, or that the material universe must be considered to house only that which qualifies as a something, the alternative entailing the exclusivity of its opposite. We cannot rule out the possibility of nature's capability to exhibit a feature ill-conforming to either category, answering nonetheless to empirical verification even while resisting configurability or objecthood in a most general sense, including the objecthood – or data input – of elusive quantum particles.

And so, provoked by this possibility, the question arises what such an unconfigured alternative would be? A rainbow might come to mind. It's not an object in the sense that it's not what we perceive it to be, but it shows itself as a perceived object, and what causes it to appear is a pattern of waterdrops in the cloud layer where it is seen. Furthermore, a brain scan of the observer watching the rainbow would confirm that there is some *thing* the perceiver's brain is responding to. Hence, the rainbow fails the test. Even ghosts and apparitions admittedly are perceived objects, though with ambiguous source domains. In any case they cannot be considered to belong to the domain of the empirical, i.e. to what can be attested to observationally as belonging to the world, based on consensus and repeated experimental investigation. Hence, they fail the test as well.

What, then, is the evidence for the existence of our proposed unconfigured alternative category? How can its place be demonstrated in the natural order? In the cosmic scheme of things?

Before proceeding on that inquiry, however, let us lay some groundwork. The "background" is the term adopted here precisely for designating this alternative category, but what exactly is the meaning thereby intended? While a more complete answer to that question will become clear in the main body of this discussion, a few words are called upon at this pivotal stage to avoid confusing the "background" with notions which misrepresent its thrust of meaning. One of the latter is simply the idea of nothing at all. The background, as here given, points to that which is an alternative to – not an opposite of – a some *thing*.

1.1 Transcendence and Ineffability

Other differentiations are likewise called for, starting with "transcendent" and "ineffable". Our alternative category steers clear of these notions as well in that what is intended by our term is not a realm of the inscrutable, the visionary or hidden reality behind the veil of appearance. Quite the contrary, it designates that which is accessible to ordinary observation, ordinary situations, ordinary people. Which is not to say that there may not be more to the background than what is accessible. Nor is this to say that we can speak about it in the way we speak about objects, in the latter case using our habits of cognitive grasp and language

distinctions in separating a "this" from a "that", typically breaking down descriptions in terms of part-whole, property-substance, cause-effect.

How the background can be handled and spoken about will be shown as we proceed. What is important here to mention is merely that a constricted language portfolio does not impute, in itself, a condition of suspect empirical standing, of so-called "ineffability" of subject matter in a pejorative sense. One need only consider the microscopic world of quantum physics and how particle behavior has challenged conventional notions of cause-effect, property-substance, part-whole. No one to my knowledge has as yet used words like "transcendent" or "ineffable" to describe the behavior of particles, though we do come across "unspeakable" (Bell 2004, Plotnitsky 2004, p. 31). In like manner, our alternative category can be thought of in terms of limited speech, without the attribution of "transcendence" and "ineffability" labels that would tend to imply suspect credibility because of inherent language constraint – associations inherited from the linguistic turn (Rorty 1993).

1.2 The "Seeming" (Dennett)

As we are still at the preliminary stage of clarifying concepts, it will not be the purpose here to argue for the empirical facticity of any of the semantic distinctions currently being discussed (that will come later) but to simply make clear at the onset how our target concept is to be understood and separated from other nomenclature. Having shown how its meaning stands distinct from that of a transcendent, non-empirically verified reality hidden behind the wall of appearance, we must be careful to steer it as well from the other side of the fence, from the notion of appearance that carries the implication of falsehood, subjectivity, and mere "seeming" (in Daniel Dennett's language), such "seeming" understood as being in contradistinction to what qualifies as truth based on third-person verification procedures (Dennett 1993, p. 211).

In short, what we are designating is a category that stands on neither side of the fence. How exactly do we mean this? On the one hand, the background will be demonstrated as verifiable based on individual confirmation and common consensus. One can, for oneself, observe, check and determine first-hand the validity of this alternative category that exposes itself on observation's turf. It is there for all to witness. Yet even in making itself known, the background paradoxically cloaks its presence from a third-person perspective. From that angle of investigation, it just isn't there on the empirical scene; it collapses as an empty concept, a blind spot from *object*-ivity's standpoint. No data correlates to it, no independent way to interpret the "seeming" or actuality of what is being witnessed. Just the source itself. We can therefore summarize by saying it has the accoutrements of a "seeming" when judged as reported content

(i.e. in the third person) but stands as real as do the objects we see around us when it is we who turn our attention to it ourselves.

Put another way, what we find as appearing to us (traditionally categorized as "phenomenal") *is* precisely our point of departure for seeking features of the empirical world which we shall collectively label the "background", the epistemic foundation of which can only be had, it is contended, by first-person means.

1.3 Why the Designation "Background"?

In proceeding on a task that would presume to redirect Kant's famous question from that of "why is there something instead of nothing at all" to our "what is this that stands other than something and nothing at all?", let us look briefly at the choice of term given here for this "other". Why the background?

We start with Charles Taylor's particular use of the term, where he describes the background as "the skein of semi- or utterly inarticulate understandings that make sense of our explicit thinking and reactions", and adds a few pages later that "our grasp of things is not something that is in us, over against the world" (Taylor 2003, p. 159, 167).[1] Our category of the background moves on from that to the notion of an exteriority of our first-person condition (exterior, that is, to mere seeming and the subjective), a situatedness which would establish the whereabouts of this background in nature.

Objectless though it be in itself, we propose that it nevertheless have discernible features. One such feature, for example, would be its constancy. One might take as an analogy a constant in nature that can be mathematically expressed – the speed of light in a vacuum, or the energy-to-wave schema of a photon. These constancies, like the background presented here, do not change. They just are. Speech becomes restricted in such contexts. Planck's constant just *is*. As to why, whither, or from whence, such questions about this constant (however speculatively curious) are closed to empirical inquiry.

Taking an analogy from mathematics and its application to nature proves only partially useful, however, in explaining what we are after. Our category of the background and its features will be demonstrated not as laws or formulas that correlate to empirical data, but as findings from witnessed evidence of that which cannot be configured as data. It matters not whether the data be from a recognizable source in nature or recorded

---

[1]The term "background" to a considerable extent owes its place in philosophy to John Searle, for whom the notion is understood to refer to a postulated mental causal mechanism that relates to pre-reflective contextual understanding, especially in language discourse, in performing skills and routines. As this concerns a direction other than where our first-person inquiry is going, we need elaborate no further on Searle's approach.

on a detection screen, where the configuration of the source is unclear. Our category is not data compatible.

1.4 How Can Something Objectless Have Objectivity?

The question above appears to pose a contradiction in terms prior to our investigation, but that arises only if "objectivity" is predefined to preempt the possibility of an objectless alternative. The evidence gathered here for the background's place in nature rests on the evidence of ordinary observation and as such can be verified by common consensus. We will, admittedly, treat the achievement of first-person verification as a presumption in what follows. Even with that understood – and even presuming the consensus universal – the objection may still be raised as to how mere witnessing, exclusively first-person attestation, can satisfy verificationist principles? Might not such admittedly wide agreement, no matter how extensive, be the product nonetheless of a misperception, a mass delusion or superstition? We have only to recall the once universal belief in a flat earth or the medieval view of the sun as revolving around our planet. How do we maintain verificationist objectivity when one excludes reasoned hypotheses and relies solely on experience as one finds it – or seems to find it?

We can respond to such remonstrances as follows. First, a look at recent history shows that massive and profound misconceptions about nature have arisen from both the application of third-person standards of hypothesis testing, as well as from reliance on direct witnessing. Einsteinian physics, followed by the revolution caused by quantum physics and its "recasting of reality", are instances of how a century of previous, third-person conceptions about the physical world were made antiquated by a subsequent reorientation in thinking.[2] That, however, did not mean the end of the scientific method.[3]

Likewise whatever their past and present errors (as, for example, are demonstrated today by neuroscience[4]), witness truth and witness consensus may open an alternative verification path to empirical insight, and in

---

[2]As Atmanspacher and Primas (2006, p. 30) note, "even the answer to the apparently easy question "what is matter?" has changed dramatically several times since 1644, when Descartes characterized matter as extended substance (res extensa) in his *Principia Philosophiae*. Science has developed in a way leading to the refutation of the original arguments of Descartes. According to modern physics matter cannot be characterized by any concept of "extension" – besides localized matter there are nonlocal manifestations of matter and physical energy."

[3]Beenfeldt's (2008, p. 16) point has bearing here: "The initial premise – that the lack of papal infallibility should lead one to treat a whole realm of human experience and cognition, whether introspection, extrospection or scientific investigation, as a mere fiction – thus seems thoroughly unjustified."

[4]For example, one comes across such neurologically-based assessments of first-person evidence as follows (Metzinger 2003, p. 221): "What we learn from the study of agnosia is that the deep structure of phenomenal experience frequently differs greatly

any case cannot be done without. All research entails first-person experiencing of some kind, if only of seeing the data for oneself. Second, it is frequently assumed that witness truth is anti-verificationist by definition, that it can only pass as "intuition", as a seeming and subjective view, until objective measures are introduced – a distancing from the witnessing – in order to confirm the veracity of what is viewed. Hence, the familiar sequence: first the "intuition" – understood as mere impression, frequently a naively held notion – then objectivity's discovery of the truth. Geocentric intuition gives way to the real picture, upon deeper analysis. The order as thus prescribed rests, it should be noted, on a particular meaning of "intuition". In the following quote by Rorty (1993, p. 199) that word acquires a different signification, one whose effect is to steer the sequence in the opposite direction:

> Since which intuitions you think have, or have not, been getting us somewhere depends in part upon where you want to go, your willingness to retain or give up certain intuitions interacts with your willingness to retain or give up certain ambitions.

Taken in this collocation, "intuition" predetermines what you do with it. Objectivity itself becomes an ambition chartered by how one defines the real, or wishes to define the real.

So, for example, the reinvention of perspective in thirteenth century art brought the depicted Madonna down from the eternal present to a nave realistic rendering in space and time.[5] Transformed in this way, her image acquired a revised literal meaning, notched in history, in a past. *That* enlightenment lay not in the technique but in the intuition, a "sensibility"[6] that took stock in a different way of how nature (in a broad sense) makes itself known. In such usage of "intuition", it is the verification that comes first. One sees with one's own eyes and aspirations. Discovery happens there, in what precedes; what follows becomes the instrumentation of it.

Underlying all of what has been said here, and what throws the issue in a different light, is the particular bent of this paper. We are out to find an empirical phenomenon that is not about anything that can be objectified, and so standards for *object* verification – configural distancing from the witnessing – cannot be applied. For the purposes of this paper, the only way to know is to witness. That is how the verification in this case is

---

from what we would intuitively take it to be from a first-person perspective. What is a dissociable element, and what is not, cannot be determined by introspection and conceptual analysis alone."

[5]John of Damascus (ca. 730 A.D.) speaks as follows: "The person depicted in an image is present in it, if his or her name is given to it. ... Its effect, however, does not lie in its material form but in the faith of the beholder" (Belting 1996, see also Freedberg 1989).

[6]Rorty's (1993, p. 199) term in his discussion of intuition.

made possible. Does this contradict the claim to objectivity? Not if by objectivity we mean the condition whereby we discern what lies exterior from subjectivity, from impressions lacking a universal empirical claim.

Our background category will admittedly be found in, and by means of, the "first-person perspective", an expression which is frequently equated with first-person experience.[7] One may question how experience (the scope of our observational experience) can be said to have spatial location in the material world, a point to be discussed.[8] In any case, that question is tangential to the more fundamental one, which is how the place of the background can be in the material world, given that its exposure is found in "experience" – a word that customarily invokes the phenomenal world of subjectivity.

2. Where to Find the Background

2.1 Evidence from Perceptual Fusion

One of the simplest ways to begin an investigation of the background is by taking stock of how it connects us to everything we observe. This connecting takes the form of a visual seamlessness between us and the world which we can refer to as perceptual fusion. We simply look at things as *they are seen by us*, which is the only way things can be looked at. The act of looking and the objects looked at are fused together, we can notice, into a seamless whole, so much so that to say they are undifferentiated amounts to a tautology.

Let us take, for example, a chair. Let's suppose that you and I are looking at it. Hence, we can say there is a consensus about that chair. The material existence of that chair is a public fact based on minimal consensus. But there's another public fact as well. It's the obvious fact that the chair we are observing is an *observed* chair, which – to put it redundantly – is the only kind of chair that has ever been observed. The same goes for stars, trees, and everything in our empirical environment.

---

[7]The reader will note that, where possible, this paper avoids the word "experience", which frequently gets understood as phenomenal subjectivity, judgment making, or in the instance of Globus (1996) as "a purely theoretical notion". We can be confident that "first-person perspective" and "external world as observed, as known through the senses" cannot be so disposed of without calling into question the possibility of any knowledge whatsoever. Nevertheless, there is much about the comment by Globus (1996) that this paper would support: "So all the term "experience" properly denotes is our thrownness in a world of qualities."

[8]On the spatial question, note Torrance's (2009, p. 116) preference for positioning experience as an exteriority that avoids the notion of being "in space". Note also Strawson's triple identity claim involving the experiencing subject, experience itself, and the experienced object (footnote 10 below), and the discussion of "perceptual projection" in Sec. 2.2.

Take that stone as another example. Where does my observing of that stone end and the stoneness part of my observation begin?[9] Is there a split? From a third-person perspective, we can treat that stone as if it were separable from the viewing ("the view from nowhere"), but as a matter of direct examination of nature, an unobserved stone has yet to be found. What we do find as a matter of direct observation is that that stone we have unearthed, or whatever the object we come across in the *empirical* world, is never just itself but fused to a state of belonging to someone's attention span.

But does this feature of the background – this fusion – constitute an exteriority? Can it be determined to be a constituent of nature, rather than simply a phenomenal effect produced in our own brains?

Not surprisingly, one finds perceptual fusion a noted topic among philosophers, especially those interested in first-person studies.[10] Nagel (1986, p. 51) characterizes this fusion as "the framework of subjective unity". Metzinger (2003, p. 133) alludes to it as the "seamless, integrated character of the overall picture", noting further that from the first-person perspective, "the phenomenal world and the phenomenal self appear not only as numerically identical to us but as *indivisible* as well" (Metzinger 2003, p. 132, his italics).

That latter point is worth considering. As I witness what's before me, no visible line – no *empirical* marker – separates me from my material existence, including the existence of the material world around me. My own body is part of this existence, i.e. this substantivity. In all of this there is no discernible trace of demarcation from the self that stands and looks. Both it and all around it, in terms of the outward view, are woven

_____

[9] "I am not able voluntarily to split or dissolve my global experiential space – *this reality* – or my own experienced identity – *myself*" (Metzinger 1995, p. 428, his italics).

[10] In addition to Nagel and Metzinger, there are for example Velmans, Strawson and McGinn, who capture this notion as follows.

Velmans (2008, p. 47): "Reflexive monism ... neither splits consciousness from matter nor reduces it to a state of the brain. Instead, it suggests a seamless, psychophysical universe, of which we are an integral part, which can be known in two fundamentally different ways."

Strawson (2003, p. 309): "The triple identity claim is in flagrant conflict with ordinary thought and talk. If you're content to rely on them, they will secure your case. My hope is that we're beyond this sort of objection by now. S is not a subject as conceived in your objection, C is not a content as you conceive it. What we have is an experience E; a living content; a content-bodied subject, S/C; a subject-animated content, C/S: [E=S=C]."

McGinn (1995, p. 149): "Consider a visual experience, E, as of a yellow flash .... E seems not to have any of these spatial characteristics; it is not located at any specific place."

Franck (2004, pp. 55f): "The act of perceiving happens in the brain as well as in the place that the object perceived occupies. The relation thus established is non-local in that the object is not just a representation, but identical with the content that the consciousness is conscious of."

together uninterruptedly. This, then, is what the overall picture manifests. I cannot stand apart.

But now comes the question as to which epistemic category we allocate this fusion. Is this melding to qualify as externally *real* or only as internally *appearing*? Nagel and Metzinger use the words "subjective", "phenomenal" to characterize it. Hence, they both would deny its standing as equivalent to that of an object of nature (object-ivity), but instead would treat this woven continuum of visual experience as an effect of the mind (subject-ivity). This is because for Nagel (1986, p. 26), "the pursuit of an objective understanding of reality is the only way to expand our knowledge of what there is beyond the way it appears to us." While for Metzinger (2003, p. 133), the reality lurks covertly behind what appears to the first-person gaze: "Our conscious experience of reality is held together internally by a principle or mechanism which itself is subjectively inaccessible."

But what is really being said here? This adjudicating of fusion to the category of appearance, this presupposing in both responses that there be a *configuration* – a covert "intelligent design" if you will, lurking behind the integrated character of the overall picture, that there be some hidden truth that would give structural intelligibility to what appears as manifestly unconfigured (holistic) to the ordinary viewer, simply redefines out of empirical existence what it is we are seeking to determine might be otherwise. So let this be our task, to scrutinize the possibility of it being so, that perceptual fusion dwells in the landscape of nature, its truth standing equivalent to whatever else is found there.

We have already springboarded this inquiry with an admitted presumption, that as regards our targeted feature consensus is not in question. We have understood this consensus to entail the fact of this witnessed "unity", this "seamless character", this "indivisibility" between seer and seen. It is the fact that that stone there is an observed stone, not an unobserved stone. As *encountered*, the object lies before us in its unseverable character of being attended to by someone's gaze. We can reasonably infer, therefore, that to the extent that that observed stone is part of nature, that which comes affixed to it – the inseparably bonded gaze – must be a part of nature as well. Being inseparable, the object seen must include the seeing of the object, and vice versa. But this cohesion is from the witness's point of view. And so the follow-up question: Is there anything in the third-person schema of knowledge, where the witnessing itself becomes the target of inquiry, that would thwart this finding we have made from the first-person perspective?

What this question amounts to is whether the object-seeking and data-seeking schema of the third-person perspective, where one sets out to seek discretable information and to disregard the seamless character of any viewing, whether such an approach can disprove – or has the means to

disprove – the background of perceptual fusion as a part of nature. In fact, it would be a contradiction to maintain that it could. By focusing on content and data, the third-person schema denies itself the very access by which to consider the question. It sees nothing of this perceptual fusion because it does not have enough of a wide-angle lens to do so. Simply stated, its object finding lens cannot encompass the exhibited permeation of the seeing with the seen *as a fact of nature.* Furthermore, a third-person strategy in this investigation is flawed by yet another handicap: whatever phenomenon it is capable of establishing verification of has to conform to data of some kind.

We can say about gravity or a black hole, about neural activity in the brain or about a rainbow in the clouds, that such phenomena are produced effects. The force of gravity is an effect produced by the mass of bodies. A black hole is an effect produced by a collapsed star. Neural activity in the brain is an effect produced by, or correlated with, conscious sensations. Raindrops of a certain pattern and density yield the effect of a rainbow. A produced effect conforms to the knowledge paradigm of the third-person perspective because it can be objectified (i.e., made data accessible) so as to provide clues to explain its appearance, what brings it about.

By contrast, the background feature of perceptual fusion, and other of its unconfigured features we will be discussing, makes itself known as an unproduced effect, somewhat like Planck's constant that describes the behavior of the atom. It just is as a designator of what is. Nothing is known to produce it.

Still, one might argue that the "effect" of perceptual fusion is produced by a *necessary* cause. Adopting the view that neural activity causes conscious experience, it might thereupon be supposed that neural activity causes perceptual fusion because without neural activity this perceptual feature would not be possible. But that misses the point. A cause of this kind gives us a premise of what is necessary in order for something to exist. It is about what enables. It fails to provide the kind of cause-and-effect relationship that objects of third-person investigation require. Defining effects by necessary causes, one can as easily argue that without nature there is no perceptual fusion either. And it may be that without neural activity there is no Planck's constant either (Hut *et al.* 2006). And for that matter, without the existence of a present time, there would be no possibility of neural activity, at least not of the kind observable in someone's present time, which is the only kind discovered so far.

Hence, we see a roadblock of a double kind in adopting a third-person strategy toward an exteriority in nature like perceptual fusion. Not only is the strategy inappropriate to the subject matter but the subject matter is inappropriate to the strategy. For these reasons such a strategy is ill-suited to determine what to make of this witnessed feature or where it belongs epistemically.

Allowing that we have found in perceptual fusion the footprints of an alternative category in nature, we can now plot the location of a second feature of the background, closely related to the first and equally accessible to the general consensus.

2.2 Evidence from Perceptual Projection

Perceptual projection is a term associated with Max Velmans and his reflexive model of perception (Velmans 2007, p. 547; 2008, p. 27). His treatment of how perception extends out of the body as an *empirical* effect, as he puts it, provides much of the grounding for what follows here.

Conceiving of our senses as extending out of our body or that our phenomenal world projects empirically into the empirical world seems to most obviously collide with scientific understanding, reversing directions as to how external stimuli are known to reach the brain. One has only to recall the mistaken theory of Empedocles that the eyes emitted light. Perceptual projection and its direction, however, are not to be sought for from a third-person scientific perspective, which is the way we ascertain light's direction to the eye. The scope we need in our undertaking must be wider, entailing a kind of objectivity that includes the observer in the observation.

Hence we turn again to the first-person perspective. From that angle of seeing, Velmans (2008, p. 9; my brackets, his italics) notes how distinctions blur, which is another way of making the case for perceptual projection:

> In sum, in terms of visual *phenomenology* [i.e., read "first-person perspective"], what I normally thought of as the "physical world", the "phenomenal world", "the world as experienced", and my "experience of the world" were *one and the same*! And I had no doubt that this was a communally shared experience.

Yet there is still this puzzle. How can this visual phenomenology he speaks about have a shared outwardness with things, a commonality with the physical world? How can it have an empirical basis if by "empirical" we mean something that can exist independently of an observer the way objects do? In short, on closer inspection are we not back to what merely *appears* from a first-person perspective, that is to say a "seeming"?

The mistake is in assuming that only an observer-independent object or feature of some kind can be an empirical one. As Velmans points out, we have only to notice the objects in our everyday environment, the obvious fact of how closely their observed locations coincide with where they actually are (Velmans 2008, p. 40). In other words, where I take things to be from my first-person perspective roughly identifies their actual location when treated as observer-independent objects whose distances and positions are more precisely measured by third-person means. This is

fortunate, for otherwise as a species we'd be poor navigators of our environment, constantly bumping into things. Hence we can conclude that just as there is a witnessed cohesion between our seeing and the seen, likewise there is an external co-positioning of this seeing-seen cohesion with the empirical location of the objects themselves. This co-positioning – or perceptual projection – must, therefore, be out there along with whatever else is determined to be in the external world.[11]

All of this leads to a rather startling conclusion: what arises here as patently immaterial – from the third-person perspective – cannot be dismissed as an empirically empty notion. Perceptual projection gives lucid evidence of an immaterial category – what Velmans (2007, p. 557, his italics) terms an "*empirically observable effect ... viewable only from a first-person perspective.*" This is another way of describing the alternative category we have set out to find, one that is empirically present or in other words situated in the very world that science investigates.[12] Importantly, however, "immaterial" is not to be understood here as something abstract or belonging to the theoretical, "realms beyond our daily experience" that physicists have entered into, "phenomena that can no longer be mapped onto patterns accessible to our sensory organs" (von Meyenn 2009, p. 13), but rather the very opposite, immaterial in the meaning of that which exposes itself to daily experience, accessible to our sensory organs but not otherwise open to scientific investigation.

The implication of such a twist that would give scientific credence to this meaning of immaterial becomes evident when one merely looks at some of the resistance to the idea. For instance, Voerman (2003, cited in Velmans 2008, p. 40, his italics):

> If there really is a phenomenal cat "out there", on the table, in *addition to* the noumenal cat, then what kind of material is there on my table out of which the phenomenal cat is composed, and *how did it get there*?

Or the objection by Van de Laar (2003, cited in Velmans 2008, p. 41):

> Should we take projection seriously and interpret Velmans as saying that the brain is in fact projecting "stuff" onto the things themselves? This would amount to a world that contains the individual things themselves and further is smeared all over by projected phe-

---

[11]As our task is limited to demonstrating that the background category and its features are as real as spatial objects in the empirical world, we leave aside questions about the ontology of nature, how real are spatial objects themselves in the external world, and hypotheses about quantum nature. They lead to issues outside the scope of this paper.

[12]"That perceptual projection viewed as a *psychological effect* may be both real and scientifically investigable will come as no surprise to experimental psychologists" (Velmans 2008, p. 27ff).

nomenal experiences belonging to all kinds of different creatures like for example Homo sapiens.

What is insightful about responses as these is that rather than offering any scientific assessment of projection they simply shun the question by predefining the possible: The empirical universe can have nothing in it except "stuff", and hence anything trespassing onto empirical territory from the phenomenal world could only be stuff. But then, in what way can there be a science of projection if access to it is closed off except by first-person means?

Certainly *how* we project our perceptions can be explained. That is where the inroad of science occurs, in the research on optical perspective, 3-D imaging, in the neural processing that correlates with the psychological component of seeing (Hoffman 2008, Velmans 2008, p. 28f). What escapes scientific explanation is why projection occurs, why it extends out of the body and brain rather than be merely subjective, hallucinatory. That is a why-question, lack of answer to which does not impede any number of scientific truths – gravity, non-locality in quantum mechanics, electromagnetism, why nature should work according to Planck's constant. That explanatory failure does not rule out the sciences. What it does do in the case of perceptual projection is serve to underscore its unconfigured status as a background feature.

2.3 The Background Feature of the Here-and-Now

That unconfigured status applies as well to the feature we take up next, the here-and-now. As in the other cases, we remain at a loss as to how to configure or object-ify this feature of the background. How to express without borders, without the fine-tuning of definition?[13] Perceptual fusion, as we have seen, points to the us-to-object cohesiveness of our outward gaze. Perceptual projection brings into focus this us-to-object cohesiveness in the external world. And the here-and-now contextualizes this cohesiveness in an immediate situation, a presentness. But these are not differences so much as divergent emphases. They are not so much roped-off features of the background as they are indicative of its uniformity, not so much particulars as they are expressive of the whole in its unparticularity. Their very blurring of boundaries, however, is itself instructive and enlightening.

---

[13]In his description of "mental" presence (a nomenclature we avoid as it leans toward intimations of subjectivity), Franck (2004, p. 48, my italics) addresses the difficulty raised above: "The state of mental presence is what we know best of all because it is what every act of experiencing is in. Yet, it is completely alien to us because we cannot grasp it in its own reality. Mental presence is a byword for concreteness. Still, it is not a *thing* we can experience with our senses. Nor is it accessible by abstract thought. It ceases to be what we are trying to grasp as soon as turned into an object of thought."

For example, how does one distinguish one here-and-now from another, one nowness from another nowness, one hereness from another?[14]   Or even a nowness from a hereness? How does one go about distinguishing the here-and-now from the *not*-here-and-now, as if the possibility of an opposite could arise, an absence entailing the state of a *not*-here-and-now? Even the supposed antithesis between "now" and "later" begs the question of nowness's temporal border.

By contrast, from a third-person perspective there is no problem with configural delineations. Unlike nowness, a time begins and ends – three minutes, five hours, yesterday. Unlike a here, places have their bordered locations – that town, this seashore. A time can be said to occupy a serial position, a number slot in a series. A place occupies a physical space. Not only is it at a physical space but it is considered to take up space at that physical space as well. On the other hand, given its amorphous parameters, one cannot imagine how the here-and-now could possibly take up space. We must be careful, however, not to let that incongruity rule out its capability of being at a space or in space, just like objects with bordered locations are.

We have already discussed the exteriority of perceptual projection, how its us-to-object cohesiveness extends into the outer world. Still, in taking up the situatedness of the here-and-now, found admittedly only in a first-person perspective – my here-and-now, your here-and-now –, how is it possible that so amorphous a feature can be in space, especially as it does not take up space? Amorphous conditions, it is true, have become an accepted feature in the scientific investigation of nature. "According to modern physics matter cannot be characterized by any concept of 'extension' – besides localized matter there are nonlocal manifestations of matter and physical energy" (Atmanspacher and Primas 2006, p. 30). But at least as regards how matter is understood today, detection remains verifiable by third-person means, recording devices and the like. By contrast, what can vouch for the spatial existence of the here-and-now, other than mere "seeming"?

One answer is simply to turn the question around. If not out in actual space, where else could it be situated? If we should treat the here-and-now as something in the realm of abstraction, a concept or idea, for example, then by denying it its place in lived experience we in effect make it into a *not*-here-and-now, a linguistically contrived opposite of what it is. Moreover, if we relegate the here-and-now to subjectivity as such, then

---

[14] "A somewhat paradoxical fact about the visual horizon, revealed by phenomenological analysis, is that the horizon itself is both *seen* and *not seen*. It is seen insofar as it is an identifiable element of the visual experience – but we cannot say that we really see the horizon in the same sense as we see all other things *within* the horizon. We can at best say that *the visual horizon is an asymptotic boundary of visual experience*" (Wackermann 2007, p. 21, his italics).

problems of knowledge arise. How could I determine the fact of anything, even of the here-and now's subjectivity, if I were not in a position to stand outside of it, situated in such a way as to recognize the mental from the empirical?

But let us put the answer more directly. Any observation we make of something in the space around us demonstrates the inescapable fact of that something being not only in space but also in a here-and-now as well, a here-and-now seamlessly connected to this object while also belonging to somebody's or some creature's perspective. Just as an unobserved stone has yet to be unearthed, so also a stone bereft of its situatedness in a here-and-now has yet to be discovered. We can extend this example to the way multiple here-and-nows interact. If temporal immediacy and presence were simply an internal matter, how would we explain the way they coordinate and synchronize one here-and-now with another?

Using the term "social objectivity", Franck (2008, p. 125) comments as follows:

> The question is thus where this social objectivity comes from. It is nonsense to assume that the synchronization of the experience we individually have of time can be brought about by way of a social convention.

He gives the example of our awakening after a dreamless sleep to find ourselves in a now that is synchronized with that of everybody else's, whatever their sleeping pattern. "Hence, there should be something beyond the individual brain that synchronizes the experience that we individually have of time" (Franck 2008, p. 130f). That "something beyond" becomes all the more apparent when observing how early in life synchronization is found to occur. According to Gallagher (2009, p. 293),[15]

> infants vocalize and gesture in ways that are affectively and temporally "tuned" to the vocalizations and gestures of the other person .... The child smiles, the adult responds with a related expression, drawing forth a continued response from the child. ... Such behavior involves temporal synchronizations and desynchronizations. By the second month of life infants are sensitive to such reciprocity (the timing and turn-taking) while interacting with others and it provides a sense of shared experience or intersubjectivity.

Even occasions of apparent dissonance may be interpreted as synchronized, as when two people walking towards each other in a narrow corridor

---

[15]The mental disorder of patients who purportedly claim they are dead, or who report partial absence of visual awareness, fails to impeach the objectivity of the here-and-now or postulate a *not*-here-and-now. At most it points to a disruption in the brain that fails to enable this feature to be recognized. See Metzinger (2003, p. 222, 336), and Gallagher's response (2005, p. 7): "There is no such thing as *real* disembodied experience" (his italics).

use coordinated movements to avoid one another, stepping aside in unison, then the other way, etc., such movements having what Torrance (2009, p. 122) terms "autonomous dynamics", i.e. "a life of their own" (citing a study by De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007).

Taking therefore the here-and-now as an exteriority, as an empirical feature despite its lack of material shape or form, how does one go about *explaining* it? What this question is really asking is: how can this first-person phenomenon, this facet of a category termed the background, get translated into third-person methodologies? While there are those who believe it can,[16] the position taken here is that it clearly cannot, and for reasons already enumerated: It is impossible for it to be objectified the way objects are, it makes itself known without any correlation to data, and it provides no distancing mechanism by which one can stand outside one's here-and-now. One cannot occupy a non-synchronized point in space from which to observe this feature and say, "This is how it really is!"

2.4 The Interpersonal Flash Point

The features of the background discussed so far suggest that a category of immateriality inheres in and among the very thingness of material nature. They suggest that this immateriality on the one hand extends from us, but on the other hand inheres in what we observe. The word that comes to assistance to meet the sense of this ambivalent template of the background is "experience". Misleadingly, this word may hint either of something extraordinary (the out-of-body experience in a crisis situation)

---

[16]For example, Metzinger (2003) says this about (1) the now and (2) the here: (1) "We are systems, which are not able to consciously experience the fact that they are never in contact with the actual present, that even what we experience as the phenomenal 'Now' is a constructive hypothesis, a *simulated* Now" (p. 57); (2) "Specifically, the spatial character of bodily experience is taken for granted, as if it were not a representational construct but something to which we had direct and immediate epistemic access" (p. 381).

When Barfield speaks of physics as describing the most fundamental reality, this again implies the derivative nature of whatever cannot be approached by third-person means (Barfield 1957, p. 38). Elsewhere, however, he suggest that, given the uncertain nature of this fundamental reality, it may be that access to it may come not only from mathematics, despite the "startling technological results" produced by the mathematics of quantum science (Barfield 1957, p. 153).

In any case, it seems a reasonable assessment that whatever the findings opened up by quantum physics, they cannot be any more fundamental than the vehicle which they ride on that enables such findings to be made – in other words, the category of the background. Which, then, is to be deemed derivative – the fundamental laws or the vehicle?

Referring to the exclusion of time's progression from the fundamental laws of physics, Strawson (2006, p. 9) observes: "Note that if temporality goes, i.e. not just space-time[TM] but temporality in any form, then experience also goes, given that experience requires time. One of the fine consequences of this is that there has never been any suffering. But no theory of reality can be right that has the consequence that there has never been any suffering."

or of something subjective and inner. The latter alternatives induce the presumption that one's sensory experience must necessarily be confined to one's body, or in other words that "the confines of the conceptual self are co-extensive with those of the subject of perceptual experience".[17] What we have endeavored to show disputes that presumption.

A final feature of the background to be discussed, one that gives added evidence of its exteriority, can be designated the interpersonal flash point. I avoid here the more familiar yet misleading terms "intersubjectivity" and "inner experience", or words like "intuition", for the reason given above and even though the topic now addressed involves feelings between people. One might ask, as a matter of consistency, how this could be a feature of nature comparable to the other features of the background discussed earlier. The answer can simply be put in terms of how we wish to define humanity. Here it is taken for granted that, whatever our cultural and intellectual endowments, our place in nature (and whatever that might imply about the background) is not thereby precluded.

Additionally, the flash point is not to be construed as a socially installed or culturally derived behavior, even though it occurs between people and lacks the static topographical quality of a tree or stone. As will be seen, in fact, it bears all the signature features of the background discussed so far – perceptual fusion, perceptual projection, and the salience of a here-and-now.

First of all, the flash point evinces a fusion in the way it melds the feeling perception of an observer with the feelings on the countenance of the person observed. Such fusions are capable of happening in those situations where the facial expression identifies how one is actually feeling. Obviously a false smile would not provide such a situation, or at least it would lack the type of experience quality that a genuine smile conveys. When the experience sharing does occur as, for example, between someone's genuine smile and the observer of that smile, it can be thought of as "direct acquaintance". Seemann (2010) describes it this way: "Since both of our psychological lives are tied in the same way to a change in our facial expression – we are both enjoying an experience of the same kind" (p. 173). It is not, however, two experiences – yours and mine – but a shared experience, i.e. "the capacity to perceptually experience aspects of the other's subjective life – feelings – which secures this kind of acquaintance" (p. 175). That sharing, it can be added, need not imply an equal sharing of whatever the felt intensity of the feelings might be.

To illustrate the flash point by way of contrasting examples, the autistic researcher Jonathan Cole points to the case of a failure of direct acquaintance in this account given by a patient with Möbius syndrome (Cole 1998, p. 186):

---

[17]Seemann (2010, p. 178f) and Torrance (2009, p. 113f) point out these limitations.

> I have thought sad ... I am sad, but do I feel sad as a state of mind
> and rather than a feeling? I don't think I am very good at reading
> others' facial movements, so that if someone comes to me sad or
> happy I don't think I immediately see that person as sad or happy.
> There is a delay while I work out whether he is coming on happy
> or sad, at a level of conscious thought.

Cole then cites a psychoanalyst and fellow researcher in autism, Peter
Hobson, who gives this description of what he considers normal facial
recognition (Cole 1998, p. 186):[18]

> The perception is not a two stage process of which the first stage is
> the perception of ... behavioral or bodily form, and the second is an
> intellectually-based attribution of meaning. Rather the perception
> is of the meaning itself ... To perceive a smile is to be inclined to
> feel certain things.

Allowing that the perceiver/feeling flash point as presented here is
grounded on sufficient evidence, little needs to be added about how it
links up with the background's other features besides perceptual fusion.
It can be taken as self-evident that the flash point cannot be other than a
here-and-now occurrence. Furthermore, involving as it does at least two
people, it must as well be an expression of perceptual projection. The em-
bodied display of feeling on that face – that smile – is capable of touching
directly the experience field of another person gazing on it. Your depicted
feeling and what I apprehend of it sews a contact, an acquaintance, that
is not merely here or there, not merely a display on your face or an aware-
ness in my internal consciousness. The sharing is fused as one projected
experience that cannot be defined by bodily boundaries. Of course, one
can dismiss the notion of a flash point of contact altogether, opting in-
stead for the Cartesian idea that other minds are hidden in the capsules
of their brains. But that throws out what infant studies and other investi-
gations indicate to be otherwise: namely, the capacity we have at least on
occasion to directly perceive another person's intentions, emotions, and
dispositions in their embodied behavior (Gallagher 2009, p. 292).

In view of the above, how then do we proceed to explain this extension
of one person's immersion into what another person feels? Such a question
harks back in turn to the question of explanatory power. Whatever the
brain enables us to do, the enabling takes us no closer to explaining why
a face is more than just its physiology or why it should be part of an
immaterial template.

---

[18]On the same point Cole (1998, p. 185) quotes Wittgenstein (*Remarks on the Phi-
losophy of Psychology*): "We see emotion. – As opposed to what? – We do not see
facial contortions and make the inference that he is feeling joy, grief, boredom. We
describe a face immediately as sad, radiant, bored, even when we are unable to give
any other description of the features. Grief, one would like to say, is personified in the
face. This is essential to what we call 'emotion'."

3. Conclusion

This paper has defended the thesis that perceptual fusion, perceptual projection, the here-and-now, and what I have termed the interpersonal flash point are features of a background category found in nature, and that knowledge of these features can be had exclusively by first-person means. Scepticism may be raised about postulating a species of immateriality in nature as if it had an empirical standing, especially given its first-person limited access. But that uncovers the issue underlying the whole of this discussion. In seeking to explain and predict, to delineate and define, scientific methodologies rest for the most part on the presumption that nature *is* its stuffness, *is* what can be understood as configured object or data detectable source. This presumption fails to take into consideration what nature offers in its unconfigured aspect, a territory unresponsive to mainstream objectifying procedures.

Acknowledgments

References

Atmanspacher H. and Primas H. (2006): Pauli's ideas on mind and matter in the context of contemporary science. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* **13**(3), 5–50.

Barfield O. (1957): *Saving the Appearances: a Study of Idolatry*, Faber and Faber, London.

Beenfeldt C. (2008): A philosophical critique of heterophenomenology. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* **15**(8), 5–34.

Bell J.S. (2004): *Speakable and Unspeakable in Quantum Mechanics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Belting H. (1996): *Likeness and Presence: a History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, transl. by E. Jephcott, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Cole J. (1997): On "being faceless": selfhood and facial embodiment. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* **4**(5-6), 467–484.

Cole J. (1998): *About Face*, MIT Press, Cambridge.

De Jaegher H. and Di Paolo E. (2007): Participatory sense-making: an enactive approach to social cognition. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* **6**(4), 485–507.

Dennett D. (1993): Back from the drawing boards. In *Dennett and his Critics*, ed. by B. Dahlbom, Blackwell, Cambridge, pp. 203–235.

Franck G. (2004): Mental presence and the temporal present. In *Brain and Being*, ed. by G.G. Globus, K.H. Pribram, and G. Vitiello, Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 47–68.

Franck G. (2008): Presence and reality: An option to specify panpsychism? *Mind and Matter*, **6**(1), 123–140.

Freedberg D. (1989): *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Gallagher S. (2005): Metzinger's matrix: living the virtual life with a real body. *Psyche* **11**(5), 1–9.

Gallagher S. (2008): Direct perception in the intersubjective context. *Consciousness and Cognition*, **17**(2), 535–543.

Gallagher S. (2009): Two problems of intersubjectivity. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **16**(6-8), 289–308.

Gallagher S. and Zahavi D. (2008): *The Phenomenological Mind: an Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science*, Routledge, London.

Genoud C. (2009): On the cultivation of presence in Buddhist meditation. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **16**(10-12), 117–128.

Globus G. (1996): Forget qualia, zombies and zimboes. Published in *JCS-online*, available at `www.zynet.co.uk/imprint/online/Globus.html`.

Hoffman D. D. (2008): Conscious realism and the mind-body problem. *Mind and Matter*, **6**(1), 87–121.

Hut P., Alford M., and Tegmark M. (2006): On math, matter and mind. In *Foundations of Physics* **36**, 765–794.

McGinn C. (1995): Consciousness and space. In *Conscious Experience*, ed. by T. Metzinger, Imprint Academic, Thorverton, pp. 149–163.

Metzinger T. (1995): Faster than thought: holism, homogeneity, and temporal coding. In *Conscious Experience*, ed. by T. Metzinger, Imprint Academic, Thorverton, pp. 425–461.

Metzinger T. (2003): *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*, MIT Press, Cambridge.

Meyenn K. von (2009): Wolfgang Pauli's philosophical ideas viewed from the perspective of his correspondence. In *Recasting Reality*, ed. by H. Atmanspacher and H. Primas, Springer, Berlin, pp. 11–32.

Nagel T. (1986): *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Plotnitsky A. (2004): The unthinkable: Nonclassicl theory, the unconscious mind and the quantum brain. In *Brain and Being*, ed. by G.G. Globus, K.H. Pribram, and G. Vitiello, Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 29–46.

Rorty R. (1993): Holism, intrinsicality, and the ambition of transcendence. In *Dennett and his Critics*, ed. by B. Dahlbom, Blackwell, Cambridge, pp. 184–202.

Seemann A. (2010): The other person in joint attention: A relational approach. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **17**(5-6), 161–182.

Stevens W. (1921): The snow man. In *Harmonium*, ed. by F. Kermode and J. Richards, Knopf, New York 1923. First published in the journal *Poetry*, vol. 19, October 1921.

Strawson G. (2003): What is the relation between an experience, the subject of the experience, and the content of the experience? *Philosophical Issues* **13**(1), 279–315.

Strawson G. (2006): Realistic monism: Why physicalism entails panpsychism. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **13**(10-11), 3–31. Reply to commentators on pp. 184–280.

Taylor C. (2003): Rorty and philosophy. In *Richard Rorty*, ed. by C. Guignon and D.R. Hiley, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 158–180.

Torrence S. (2009): Contesting the concept of consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **16**(5), 111–126.

Velmans M. (2007): Where experiences are: dualist, physicalist, enactive and reflexive accounts of phenomenal consciousness. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* **6**(4), 547–563.

Velmans M. (2008): Reflexive monism. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **15**(2), 5–50.

Wackermann, J. (2007): Inner and outer horizons of time experience. *Spanish Journal of Psychology*, **10**(1), 20–32.