Absence and objectivity

Abstract

I first show that insights about the phenomenological and epistemic role of structural features of experience can be recruited in favour of recent defences of the view that absence experience is non-veridical. Against this backdrop, I then defend the opposing view – namely, that absence experience is veridical – while retaining some such insights.

What is a ghost? A terrible event condemned to repeat itself? An instant of pain, perhaps. Something dead that appears at times alive. An emotion suspended in time, like a blurry photograph, like an insect trapped in amber.

– Guillermo del Toro

Introduction

Nobody believes little Carlos when he says, in Guillermo del Toro's *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), that he has been seeing a ghost at night. These are the nineteen-forties, and this, a group of Spanish republicans. Grown-ups believe in science here. They are fighting, in fact, the old mindset that made people believe royals had divine rights, that magical healing worked (the head of the group is a physician), and that there exist such things as ghosts. But what if ghosts were not viewed by these sceptics to be substance-like, yet immaterial things? Not actually dead people walking but the living's own evocation of the past? Not bodily but happening or fact-like entities – or as the narrator puts it, 'terrible events'? Would the sceptics be willing to accept the existence of ghosts in that case? Would they be able, like Carlos, to *see* them?

It takes a conceptual shift of this kind for the unwilling to see what is haunting them in this ghost story. The present paper attempts a shift more or less like that. I want to convince the reader to believe me when I say that I can see something like ghosts – that I can see absences. To say this is to say that my visual experience of them is veridical. But what does it mean for a perceptual experience to be veridical? The answer is usually given in contrast with two other notions: those of hallucinatory and illusory experience. If someone is having a visual experience as of a white horse, it may be that she is really seeing a white horse (in which case the experience is veridical), that she is seeing a black horse (in which case it is illusory), or that she is seeing no object at all (in which case it is a hallucination). At a minimum, for an experience to be neither illusory not hallucinatory, the presence of the perceived object before the subject seems to be required; and the presence of an object entails, of course, its existence. Given this, there are objects that we know we don't, cannot, perceive; objects such that, if they appear in any experience, then it's likely to be non-veridical. Experiences as of unicorns, say, or as of pink elephants. Unicorns do not exist; they are objects of hallucination. Elephants exist but they are typically not pink; pink elephants are likely to be objects of illusion.

Where does absence experience fall? Recent work on the matter of absence experience tells us that our ontology should not accept them as worldly constituents, and that, even if it did, they could not be recognised as having observable properties such that we could see them. Thus, absence experience is an illusion. This paper begins by arguing that this view – call it 'illusionism' – is linked to a couple of independent commitments. The first is that that there are features of absence experience that are not explained by appeal to what is in view but to the subject herself (Section 1). The second is the view that absence perception is a species of

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object perception, where the dichotomy is sharp between this and another kind of state, fact perception (Section 2). The problem with treating absence experience as non-veridical is that it runs counter to ordinary perceptual discourse, however, according to which we take ourselves to be enjoying veridical experiences whenever we see absences. In Sections 3 and 4 I attempt to make room for the possibility of honouring the explanatory relevance of facts about the subject while dispensing with the assumption that absence experience has to fit either the object or fact-perception model. This would open the possibility of regarding absence experience as something other than hallucinatory or illusory, that is, as veridical, because there would be no posited *object* – non-existent or misperceived – to non-veridically see.

The project is ambitious, and in the length of this paper I cannot carry it out in full detail. My aim here is to make the idea that absence experience is veridical *intelligible*: to make room for it in logical space, as it were. My aim is, in other words, to effect a shift in the reader that opens her to regarding absence experience in the way sceptics regarded, after their shift in perspective, Carlos's experience of ghosts – whatever exactly ghosts turn out to be.

1. Illusionism

1.1

What does it amount to, exactly, to say that absence experience is not veridical, and that speech in which absences are reported as seen – and in which predications are made of them – is false? I will assume it amounts to saying, explicitly or implicitly, that absence experience is illusory, such that attributing properties to absences in perceptual reports in the way we do with ordinary objects is to say something false. 'I can see that hole is big', 'I see something entirely black, total darkness', and 'I can feel Pierre's absence from this place' are all false reports on such a view. There is no such thing as a hole there to be seen as big, no such thing as darkness there with a black appearance, and no such thing as Pierre's absence for one to feel.

Our foil will be recent work by Stephen Mumford (2021) and Laura Gow (2020). Both Mumford and Gow divide the logical space between 'perceptual' and 'cognitive' views: views on which absence experience is explained in terms of a perceptual state and views on which it is explained in terms of a cognitive one, specifically, a belief. Both authors pitch their own views as avoiding the problems they see in both possibilities, too. Mumford's view is straightforward: it is the view that absence experience is 'an illusion, albeit a useful one, of the mind'. His reason to claim so is straightforward too: '[w]hat is not there cannot be seen. Only presences – what is there – can be seen. Yet absences *seem* experientially accessible. They have a phenomenology, even if an elusive one' (my italics). It is, on Mumford's view, an adaptive advantage of our cognitive system that we experience darkness, holes and people's absences (he considers all three kinds) as constituents of the world along with light, substances and people.

The account is meant to deal with the dangers faced by both perception and belief-based views. To say that absence experience is an illusion is to deny that it is a veridical perception, which any naturalist who respects the view that 'to qualify as a genuine perception, the object perceived must be the cause of the perception' (Mumford op cit., §7.3.3) would want to deny.[1] And to say that it is a useful illusion allows accommodating the phenomenology, which is, evolution-wise, usefully akin to that of veridical perception into the account. So, in short, for Mumford, 'absences are experienced perceptually but only because of a mechanism where an inference is presented phenomenally' (op cit., §7.6).

Gow, too, denies the view that we literally see absences, and for similarly naturalistic reasons. Only Gow's wariness is broader. It is theoretically costly, she writes, to 'tak[e] a realist stance towards absences and permit[…] them a role in the perceptual process' (op cit., p. 172), and not just for the burden of explaining how absence causation might work, but also for reasons to do with ontological parsimony.[2] Yet the cost of non-veridicalism, Gow writes, is to deny that 'absence experiences "get the world right"' (p. 172). This is a problem because Gow thinks absence experiences do yield knowledge of the world. How absence experience could get the world right if absences do not exist – and if they exist, do not have the requisite causal or observable properties – can therefore only be explained, for Gow, by a kind of cognitive account, albeit not one that simply regards absence experience as a combination of perceiving present entities plus believing something is not there. Such a view, which would analyse the experience of a gone laptop as '[t]he perceptual phenomenology (of the empty table top, say) plus the belief (that one's laptop is no longer there)' (p. 175) faces the following 'decisive' objection:

> [A]bsence experience exhibits resilience to a change of belief. If you are told that your laptop is still on the table and a magician is playing an elaborate trick with mirrors, you will still experience the absence of your laptop even though you now believe that your laptop is not absent. A proponent of the belief/judgement version of the cognitive view must therefore allow that a subject can simultaneously (and consciously) believe or judge *p and not p* (op cit., p. 176).

This problem gives Gow her cue. On her view, absence experience is explained by a non-perceptual state that is belief-like in that it bears propositional content, but not belief-like it in that it is not consciously available for reasoning, and would not typically be endorsed by the subject. She calls this an 'intellectual seeming'. Intellectual seemings 'have a belief-like or judgement-like phenomenology,

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[1] Where being a 'veridical perception' is incompatible with being a 'veridical hallucination'.
[2] Gow doesn't actually put this point in terms of parsimony. She writes, rather, that 'anyone with physicalist leanings would be wise to avoid a theory which posits such entities' [as absences] (Gow op cit., p. 170). I've decided to interpret her in this way to simplify things and avoid the issue of what it means for something to be a physical entity, which question she herself doesn't address.

and the same direction of fit as beliefs and judgements. […] Consequently, their content can be true or false/accurate or inaccurate depending on whether the world really is the way it is represented by the intellectual seeming' (ibid.). Gow refers us to extant literature on intellectual seemings for a thorough characterisation,[3] and relies on examples for her own exposition:

> [A] bat and a ball cost $1.10 and the bat is $1 more expensive than the ball— how much does the ball cost? The answer most people give to this question is '10 cents', which is incorrect—the correct answer is 5 cents. Interestingly, even when we are familiar with the puzzle it may still seem to us that the answer is 10 cents. If so, this would be an intellectual seeming. It cannot be a belief, since we know and believe that the correct answer is 5 cents (ibid.).

Just as, when presented with the puzzle, it immediately seems to most people that the answer is '10 cents', so too when presented with an absence, it immediately seems to me that there is something out there, an absence. But absences are appropriate contents only of beliefs or intellectual seemings; they cannot be, for the rehearsed reasons, contents of experience (assuming a representational framework) or constituents of it (assuming a non-representational one). And just as the intellectual seeming with the content '10 cents' might be explained in a different way from an intellectual seeming with the content 'heavier objects fall faster', say (another of Gow's examples), on account of there being different background beliefs or intellectual seemings about how subtraction and physics work, so might different intellectual seemings of absences be explained differently. A mismatch between what is perceived and the subject's expectations, understood propositionally (as holding some attitude expressible as 'expecting that…'), might explain a few cases;[4] a failure of the subject's body schema to update itself after a bodily change might explain others, as when one expects one's tooth to be absent because one just saw the dentist remove it but is nevertheless struck by the experience of feeling the gap it left.[5] Moreover, some experiences of absence might have a non-perceptual dimension that can be accommodated by a further, 'meta-cognitive' view, one which explains the feeling of surprise that often – but not always – accompanies experiences of absence.[6,7]

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[3] She highlights Huemer (2007), Reiland (2015) and Tucker (2013), but mentions other relevant work. See her op cit., pp. 169 and 173.
[4] Cf. Farennikova (2013).
[5] Cf. Cavedon-Taylor (2017).
[6] Cf. Martin and Dokic (2013).
[7] Because Martin and Dokic's (op cit.) view may help to explain something at the 'meta' level (the meta-cognitive or meta-perceptual level, that is), I take it to be compatible with both views and leave it largely undiscussed. Yet as other (esp. Cavendon-Taylor op cit. and Gow 2018) have pointed out, the feeling of surprise is contingent. A bereaved person might in fact experience something like the converse. They might suffer to see their expectations of the

Now, while Gow denies that we literally see absences she does not, unlike Mumford, explicitly call absence experiences illusory. Yet I want to suggest that her view qualifies a form of illusionism as I've proposed to understand it because we find in it a prediction of systematic falsehood for perceptual reports about absences. Even though in absence experience, Gow thinks, we somehow 'get the world right', the price is 'getting' something different altogether. The *subject matter* of the knowledge such experiences deliver are not absences, on Gow's view, because there are no such things: 'I see total darkness' is literally false: it doesn't license inferring 'I see something black', say.

Perhaps sentences about absence experiences should be paraphrased in an absence-nominalistically acceptable way for the knowledge these experiences deliver to be truthfully expressed on Gow's view: not 'I see total darkness' but 'I see that there is no light'; not 'I see holes in the cheese' but 'I see that the cheese is perforated'.[8] Understood as experiences *about* absences (rather than about light or cheese), Gow's account sides with Mumford's, though. Where for Mumford absence 'perceivers' undergo an illusion in taking themselves to enjoy veridical experiences when they attribute blackness, volume, and so on to darkness, holes, and people's absences, for Gow subjects seem to experience experiencing something like an 'intellectual illusion' – insofar as their seeming is non-veridical – whenever the ball *seems* to them to cost 10 cents, heavier objects *seem* to them to fall faster, and absences to be there.

1.2

Let me make two remarks about the label I'm proposing for Gow and Mumford's views before proceeding. First: insofar as the key feature I want to attribute to the target views is the denial that reports such as 'I see total darkness' or 'I can see a big hole' are true (such that inferring 'I see something black' and 'I see something big' wouldn't be licensed, because there are no such things), one might want call these views simply 'anti-realism' about absences, a view that regards absence experience as non-veridical. The claim that absence experience is *illusory* might be thought to be an additional step. On the other hand, note that although Mumford and Gow both want to disavow what they identify as the strict cognitivist side of the literature about absence experience as much as the perceptualist side, their views are clearly closer to the former. Mumford explains absence experience in terms of the possibility of an 'inference [being] presented phenomenally'; Gow, in terms of 'intellectual seemings'. What distinguishes them from *strict* cognitivism is their acknowledgement that there's a phenomenology in absence experience; yet their inferential and intellectual-

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absence confirmed time and time again when entering new rooms in the house, or visiting once shared spaces.

[8] But see Lewis and Lewis (op cit.), Bricker (2016), §4.2 on the (non-)promise of nominalistic paraphrase for sentences about absences.

seeming explanations, respectively, make their views a qualified cognitivism all the same. We can call their view 'qualified cognitivism' about absences, then.

Nothing much hangs on the label they might share for present purposes.[9] The choice of 'illusionism' owes to the fact that I am opposing their view to veridicalism about absence experience, and that Gow and Mumford would agree on the following claims: (i) subjects routinely undergo experiences they would report with sentences such as the above (sentences where absences are treated as objects of experience and are attributed properties), (ii) but these reports are literally false. It doesn't seem unfair to call the non-veridical intellectual seeming Gow attributes to her subjects a kind of illusion (her subjects are, after all, *under the illusion* that p while not-p), while it would seem odd to call that seeming a 'hallucination'. Moreover, Gow's and Mumford's explanations share a structure: for Mumford, subjects are under the illusion that what is an inferential experience is in fact a perceptual one; for Gow, they are under (again, it's not clear what else to call it) the illusion that the intellectual seeming they undergo is not such but instead a factive state.

I do not wish to dwell on the details of illusionism/non-veridicalism here. What I want to point out is that such a position is interestingly supported by independent theorising on the phenomenological and epistemic upshot of certain invariant, or 'structural', features of experience. The main work to mention here is by Roy Sorensen (2008), Clare Mac Cumhaill (2015, 2018) and Dominic Alford-Duguid (forthcoming).

Sorensen's is probably the most discussed work on all matters of darkness and shadows. His point of departure is that experiencing darkness, while subjectively indiscriminable from the state of not seeing anything, is not to be identified with that state. This comes with the consequence that, assuming we can see a uniformly illuminated white wall and fail to believe that we do (because we lack the relevant concepts, because we think we see pure white light, or whatever), we can see total darkness and fail to believe that we do. Darkness is, like any present entity, something we can non-epistemically see.

This point might make it seem like Sorensen will sympathise with a veridical view of seeing darkness, but it's not clear that he does. Consider Sorensen's observation, which he makes channelling vision scientist Leo Hurvich, that 'the visual system does not treat darkness as a privation of light' even though that's what it *is* (2008, p. 138). 'The culprit', Sorensen writes, 'is our pre-Newtonian visual system' (p. 250). The result is the visual system's responding with a totally black experience to total darkness just as it would respond with a totally white experience to a uniformly illuminated white wall if pressed up against one's nose.[10] So our experience of total darkness is not to be understood as a perceptual encounter with a black thing. If Sorensen is right that the culprit of our 'mistreatment' of the absence of light is our pre-Newtonian visual system, it is plausible that some other creature's visual system would treat the absence of light as the privation it is. It is difficult,

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[9] Indeed, nominalism about absences springs to mind, too.
[10] The example is Dretske's (1969, pp. 26-7).

evidently, to imagine such a creature's phenomenology, but if the mark of our mistreatment of light privation is that it manifests in a positive experience of blackness, then that other creature's 'correct' treatment may manifest in a different response than blackness, as *that* is the result of our visual system's 'mistake'. Such a line of though seems conducive to predicting, like the views above, an attribution like 'total darkness is black' to be false.

Now, Sorensen doesn't claim that seeing darkness is an illusion. In fact, he makes this diagnosis for a peculiar kind of case:

> An astronaut with his back to the sun would see space as black even though she is bathed in much light, [but] because darkness is the absence of light, the astronaut's black experience is a *false* representation of darkness […] the astronaut is experiencing an illusion' (Sorensen op cit., pp. 250-1, emphasis original).

Whether or not this means Sorensen regards attic-variety experiences of darkness as veridical, my point is to note that Sorensen's view is a precedent of the inclination to account for absence experience in terms of invariant facts about the subject's perceptual system rather than about what the subject sees. Mac Cumhaill and Alford-Duguid are just two of the most recent authors to follow this path, albeit focusing on a different kind of invariant fact about the subject – not contingent facts resulting from human evolution but facts about the structure of experience itself.[11]

Structural features of experience play a role in other instances of experiencing absence. Take the absence of a specific individual in a context: Pierre's absence in the café, or the absence of Gow's laptop from her table. Mac Cumhaill (2018) has recently developed a Sartrean view of cases like this. Mac Cumhaill starts from a point of sympathy for a theory that is, at least, compatible with realism about absences, which compatibility can appear to be at odds with the insight that Sartre's cognitive attitudes, specifically his expectation to find Pierre at the café, must have some explanatory role in his experience of Pierre's absence. Mac Cumhaill's solution is to shift the object of Sartre's perception. On her view, '[i]t can be granted that absences are ways the world is. Nonetheless, it is insisted that what Sartre perceives is not an absence but an *absential location*, the bounds of which are circumscribed attitudinally – by reference to Sartre's interests and intentions' (Mac Cumhaill 2018, p. 41). The distinction is between absences, which are 'ways the world is at a particular locale' but don't have 'sensible properties [… that may help them] ground there being "anything it's like" to perceive them', and absential locations, which are 'places at which the application of the predicate 'is absent' to an absentee is true when evaluated relative to those places' (op cit., p. 36). Places being sensible, concrete entities, absential locations can be perceived just like any other place is.

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[11] As Mac Cumhaill (2015, p. 688) points out, this body of literature seems to have been sparked by M.G.F. Martin's (1992, 1993) comparative analysis of structural features of visual and bodily/tactual experience. See also Richardson (2010), Soteriou (2013) and Phillips (2013).

This new explanandum is less problematic. The question of how seeing absential locations is possible does not have the ontological burden the question of seeing absence has. A view that is silent on issues to do with what kind of things are perceptible and focuses merely on the subject-side of the phenomenon becomes acceptable, then. Mac Cumhaill's proposal is that Sartre has already offered such a view. In perception, Mac Cumhaill tells us that Sartre writes, "there is always the construction of a figure on a ground', where, notably, the ground is seen 'in addition' to the figure' (p. 39). Just as thoughts are believed to have a distinctive structure (a subject-predicate structure, say), so does perception have a distinctive figure-ground structure. In absence perception, 'one intuits *only* the ground' (ibid.). The café may play the role of the figure for someone who is looking for a place to sit, but for Sartre, the café – the 'mirrors, patrons and rattling saucers' – all blend into an undifferentiated ground onto which a figure fails to appear. What explains the experience of absence is not, then, anything that hits Sartre's retina. But the explanation remains perceptual because the figure-ground structure is a fact about the perceptual apparatus. Which (again) still makes room for attitudes playing an explanatory role. As Mac Cumhaill hastens to remark, 'low-level implicit expectations [of the kind appealed to by Farennikova] are likely to govern explanatorily relevant patterns of perceptual activity' (p. 45). Expectations might determine what will count as figure and what as ground.

Finally, a third reason to think structural features are relevant to the issue at hand involves spatial awareness. As Mac Cumhaill herself (2015) and, more recently, Alford-Duguid (forthcoming) have argued, reflection on the phenomenon of seeing empty space reveals aspects of perceptual experience – such as its phenomenology and the range of beliefs it can justify – that cannot be explained purely in terms of what is perceived.[12] Consider a perceiver's sense that the space she sees is part of a larger space. This 'sense' is a matter of visual phenomenology but also something that can figure in the content of a belief. On Alford-Duguid's view, this belief – expressible as 'the region in view is a sub-region of a larger space' – is justified by the perceiver's awareness of her visual field's boundedness, which very notion implies an outer realm, something beyond what the bounds are of.

One curious feature of this belief is that while it is not a priori (one has to open one's eyes in order to enjoy visual awareness of the boundedness of the visual field), the belief is immune to the kind of defeaters to which perceptual beliefs are typically vulnerable, such as reliable testimony that one is suffering a hallucination. Alford-Duguid's way to explain this difference takes after the way P. F. Strawson (1950) puts the difference between asserting and presupposing that *p*. 'Visual experience perceptually presupposes that the region in view is a sub-region of a larger space, and does so because it involves awareness of the spatial sensory field as

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[12] Mac Cumhaill eventually challenges this, but on her view (as in her (2018) work on absential locations, incidentally), the explanandum turns out to be different from the one with which she started. She ends up re-casting the phenomenon of seeing empty space as one of seeing a positive thing, a region with a look in its own right, rather than as a species of absence experience.

bounded by our sensory limitations' (Alford-Duguid op cit., §4.2). The belief that there is a red apple in front of you loses its justification ('is defeated') when you learn the apple is white (the red appearance is just a trick of the light). This kind of justification is dubbed by Alford-Duguid 'presentational'. It pertains to beliefs about what is presented to the subject. The belief that the region in view is a sub-region of a larger space cannot be defeated in this way, because the belief is not about anything that is presented to the subject.

One might make a similar point with regards to the contribution of presentational and structural features of experience to *phenomenology*. If there is something it is like to be aware of the boundedness of one's visual field, then this aspect of visual phenomenology is not contributed by any presented objects.[13] A consequence of this latter point is that the notion of the 'diaphaneity' of experience is threatened. This is the notion that experience is 'transparent' or 'diaphanous', that is, devoid of any qualities that may be attributable to the experience itself rather to what whatever objects it is an experience of.[14] Take a hypothetical case of experiencing emptiness, as in the all-white scenarios from the *Matrix* films that are meant to represent a blank canvas in which an experience simulation can be run.[15] There is, by hypothesis, nothing the experience is of in this case. This blank canvas – called 'the Construct' in the films – is not only visually empty; it is supposed to be gravity-less, odourless; to be devoid, in short, of all kinds of circumstances of which we ordinarily gain knowledge by being perceptually open to the world. Characters can stand on their feet, as though in an Earth-like gravitational setting, by a further specification, and similarly see themselves and each other thanks to the specification that there appear to be light, and so on. But they know there is in fact nothing there.[16]

Suppose you find yourself in the Construct. Your experience might resemble that of Sorensen's astronaut if she found herself in a genuinely light-devoid space, floating in a space that is all-black. There is something it is like to find yourself in this situation. The white look of blank space helps to imagine being aware of the bounds of your visual field. There is nothing being presented to you; yet, you can have one perceptually justified belief: the belief that there is emptiness around you, where the phenomenology of that experience cannot be attributed to any object it is of (since there isn't one). In this scenario, the character of the experience is thus

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[13] The notion that perception of limits or bounds generally presents a counterexample to the claim that the phenomenology of experience depends entirely on presented objects can be found elsewhere (Barker and Jago 2012, p. 134). More on this shortly.

[14] To renegotiate the view is indeed one of the aims of Mac Cumhaill (2015). See esp. pp. 190-2.

[15] See https://matrix.fandom.com/wiki/Construct

[16] Not even they themselves are there, according to the fiction, because the Matrix is a simulation. I assume here, not uncontroversially perhaps, that if it is possible to imagine a scenario where one's embodied self, not just one's virtual avatar, is floating in a blank void, perhaps having learned to live without oxygen, then such is a logically possible scenario. I ask the reader to follow me in assuming this and in supposing such a modified version of the scenario in the main text.

explained purely in terms of a structural feature of it, not in terms of anything in view.

To wrap up. In the previous sub-section, I presented views that predict reports of absence experience to be false, since they predict absence experience itself to be non-veridical. In the last few pages, I've suggested that independent considerations about structural features of experience support such a non-veridicalist stance. The experience of darkness can be explained without appeal to anything expansive and black; it can be explained by appeal just to the pre-Newtonian nature of the visual system. Experiencing the absence of individuals can be explained by pointing out that perceptual states have a distinctive figure/ground structure, such that in (what we call) absence experience, what is seen is just a figureless ground. And the experience of emptiness can be explained by appeal to no further entity beyond the perceiver herself; it can be explained by pointing out that visual experience gives us awareness of a larger region than the one bounded by the visual field, even when that region is empty.

2. A step back: on the objects of experience

I advertised the end of this paper as advocating for veridicalism about absence experience. So far, all I have done is show how hard independent considerations make it. What could a realist about absences such as myself cling to?[17] One might start by noting a pattern in the structural explanations just discussed. Visual experience systematically gives us both positive and negative knowledge, knowledge not only about what the experience is of but also about what it is *not* of. And absence experience is not the only instance of this phenomenon. Consider Stephen Barker and Mark Jago's (2012, p. 134) discussion of edge perception:

> [T]he perception of edges […] is an important component of human object recognition. [In] the analogous case of computer vision, [… o]ne might think […] that an image can be represented as positive information only. This is not the case, however. The value representing the intensity of each pixel contains both positive and negative information: a pixel's intensity value says that the pixel is at least this bright but *no brighter*. The numerical value associated with each pixel encodes both a positive and a negative fact. We

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[17] An alternative, which I will not consider here, might be to endorse Elizabeth Anscombe's (1965/1981) view that perception verbs are intentional, meaning that the object they take is primarily to be read as an intentional object – the object the subject takes herself to perceive. (A similar notion of 'intentional object' can be found in Crane's (2013) account of empty reference.) This approach can avoid rendering absence experience reports as false but does not allow to pose oneself the question of whether the reported absence exists and has the properties it is experienced as having, simply because, on that view, that question is beyond the philosopher of perception's job. Cf. also Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman (2021).

suspect that a similar story holds of edge-detection in human perception (emphasis original).

Regardless of whether Barker and Jago's analogy between computer and human vision is right, the insight that perception of things comes with perception of their edges is plausible enough. Indeed, one might read Fred Dretske's (1969) well-known view that what is seen must be 'visually differentiated from its immediate environment' as saying that the perception of x's edges *enables* the perception of x itself. If this is right, then edge or boundary perception is an invariant feature of visual experience, too. Experience is simply such that seeing things typically comes with seeing their limits. And in cases where one does not see the limits of what one sees, as in the case of seeing a uniformly illuminated white wall pressed against one's nose, then one is aware of one's own sensory limits at least. So one enjoys awareness of some limit or other in having any visual experience. Note that this further structural feature of experience may help to explain hole perception. Holes can be regarded as the inner limits of their material hosts. Indeed, a kinship between holes and edges is seen by Ian Phillips in the auditory case: '[i]f we think of pauses as auditory "holes," we can think of such phenomena [as hearing a single sound cease] as auditory "edges"' (2013, p. 341).[18]

Generally speaking, then, just by opening our eyes, we put ourselves in a position to gain both positive and negative knowledge, knowledge that light is not present, that Pierre or Simone aren't, that nothing is being presented (the Construct), or that x – a seen object, or our own visual field – extends up to here and *no further*. We might follow Alford-Duguid in calling these bits of negative knowledge 'structurally', not 'presentationally', justified, where both varieties of justification count as perceptual. That the knowledge acquired in absence experience is non-presentational is fitting; by definition, the purported experienced entity is not a presented object.

But I said I'd give a defence of veridicalism a go. Didn't I just bolster the adversary's point? Granting – no, having myself made the case – that all our examples can benefit from a structuralist explanation, I want to point out now that they leave an aspect of the experience unaccounted for: the contribution of absences to the phenomenology of experience. Let me make this point by analogy. Take a flower that reflects wavelengths into the near-ultraviolet. Our experiencing the petals as blue-ish whereas hummingbirds do as ultraviolet-ish can be explained by appeal to structural differences between our visual systems. Neither we nor the hummingbirds are experiencing an illusion; both ways of appearing are objective features of the mind-independent flower. The phenomenon of variation between subjects' experience of one and the same thing is useful when philosophers want to illustrate the point that

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[18] One might worry that appeal to edge perception is an appeal to the figure/ground structure of perception in disguise. It is likely the two are related: perhaps the figure/ground structure of perception explains our perception of edges; perhaps our sensitivity to edges explains the figure/ground structure instead. What's important for my purposes is the point that perception can give us negative knowledge.

perceptual experience involves not merely perceiving objects but doing so in certain ways. M. G. F. Martin writes, '[w]hy cannot the *ways* in which things are presented make a difference to what the experience is like in addition to what is perceived?' (Martin 1998, p. 175). One natural way to accommodate this thought is by regarding perception to be a three-place relation where the subject and the object are two relata and the third element is something like the 'standpoint' from which the subject relates to the object (Campbell 2009), which standpoint may include facts like the number of the subject's cones. Alternatively, the third relatum might be constituted by the conditions of viewing (the light being cool or warm, say) relative to which the object will appear in one way or another (Brewer 2011). As has been recently argued, though, the acknowledgement that objects can appear differently to subjects needn't push one to see perception as including a further, third element than the subject and the object themselves (French and Phillips 2020). The different ways in which objects are presented to subjects needn't be, in other words, reified. Acknowledging, precisely, that 'there is no unique way of perceiving [an object]', say a red car, leads one to the thought that 'nothing other than the car and its redness need be presented to [a subject]' in the first place (French and Phillips op cit., p. 7). The objects which are presented in perception can shape the character of our experience in one way or another depending of a variety of factors like the lighting and our number of cones, yes, but this is already part of what it is for an *object* to appear in certain ways and for a *subject* to be sensitive to certain ways objects have of being experienced.

Pairs of subjects like humans and hummingbirds – call them 'contrast pairs' – help to bring out the contribution of what we see to the phenomenology of experience. If what we see did not make a phenomenological contribution, there would be no difference in the character of our experience between differently sensitised subjects. Consider our experience of total darkness and that enjoyed by the creature whose visual system responds to it by eliciting what we would call 'whiteness'. Here we have a pair of subjects who, like the pair of humans and hummingbirds, have a different phenomenology in response to one and the same thing. We might characterise the form of both cases by saying that 'S_1 experiences some thing x in some way w_1 and S_2 in some way w_2'. But if absences do not exist or are not really there, we are missing the x element that is treated in a pre-Newtonian and post-Newtonian way by us and the post-Newtonian creature, respectively.

My argument in favour of veridicality hinges, then, on the observation that absence experience can vary in the way ultra-violet-flower experience can. This is supported by our ability to think up similar contrasting pairs for other varieties of absence. Consider a Matrix programmer who makes a mistake and doesn't code for emptiness to look white but red for some particular Construct user. Neo experiences emptiness as white; Trinity as red.[19] Consider the absence of ink in a circular region

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[19] In image processing software, the absence of content has a particular representation: not as white – which would be, as in the Construct, a further specification – but as a pattern of white and grey squares.

of a two-dimensional, otherwise black image, and imagine a robot whose vision is not programmed to encode negative information as Barker and Jago tell us computer vision typically is. Then the robot does not detect a hole – or the inner limits of the expanse of black ink – but rather a white, round object. Finally, imagine Sartre is accompanied to the café by a creature who has the power to see the shape of individuals who were present minutes before, perhaps because she sees the molecules left by their scent in the way we see shooting stars' wakes. Suppose that by the time Sartre gets there, Pierre has only just left. Then Sartre and the creature will experience the absence differently.[20]

If theoretical parsimony drives us to accept a picture of perception on which the ways in which reality is perceived are not further entities to count among the subject and object but rather to be associated with the presented objects (to be regarded as attributes of them, as ways *they* have of appearing), then a non-veredicalist about absences (driven, presumably, by parsimony to their view) will end up missing what the relevant ways of appearing in the above cases are *of.* And it's just these ways of appearing what explains intersubjective phenomenological differences.

Now, perhaps absences appearing to be ontologically unnecessary in an account of absence experience is explained by an intuition like the one I have phrased, borrowing Alford-Duguid's words, by saying that the knowledge acquired in absence experience has a structural, not presentational, justification. This intuition seems, admittedly, correct. The relevant knowledge does not hinge, by definition, on any object being *presented* to the subject. Yet this doesn't mean there is *nothing* the subject is perceptually aware of. This is true in *other* cases: in cases of absence of awareness of anything. The Construct user's case is the clearest one in this respect. The knowledge in question doesn't depend on presented objects, true,[21] but there is still perceptual awareness being enjoyed here, and there is something it is like to be in such a state. For first timers, as shown in the film, such phenomenology is striking.

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[20] This scenario turns on experiencing Pierre's absence in a way that cannot be generalised to, for example, a case where Pierre wasn't there. But other thought experiments can fix this. Imagine that Sartre's café is not the Deux Magots in Paris but the canteen in the space station from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), where a nearby planet's strange atmosphere makes it so that when a person misses someone, the absentee materialises and becomes visible. Here the contrast pair is Paris Sartre and space-station Sartre, both of whom experience the same thing – Pierre's absence – differently.

[21] It is not clear an objector could say the presented object in this case is one's own body. Alford-Duguid's view rests on work by Richardson (2010) and Soteriou (2013) who start, precisely, by contrasting our awareness of the region in view as bounded, which we have merely by awareness of our sensory limitations, with the awareness we might have of the limits of our body. '[T]he limits of bodily awareness do not strike us as merely sensory; they seem due to the boundaries of an object—the body', Alford-Duguid writes. Why not so in the case of the boundedness of the visual field? The response might be that the contours of the visual field do not seem to be perceived as associated with anything bodily – as the contours of our eye sockets, say. In half-closing our eyes, we *are* aware of our eyelids, yes, but this now counts as seeing something within our visual field rather than as modifying its boundaries.

So what does this phenomenology hinge on? There is another intuition in the background of this gap, an intuition about the sort of things we can perceive. It can be traced to a view on which there is a dichotomy between object and fact perception, a dichotomy not always explicitly stated but often assumed (cf. e.g. Dretske 1969, 1999, 2000; Williamson 2000). Let me elaborate. A natural way to check whether a perceptual report expresses one or the other kind of perceptual state is to focus on the complement of the perceptual verb. If the complement is – or is amenable to – a sentential complement, then the state is one of fact perception. For example, 'I see the limits of my visual field' has a noun phrase as complement, but it seems amenable to a rephrase like: 'I see that my visual field is bounded'. This is fitting: such a perceptual state makes reference to no presented objects, and the perceptual belief in question is, as we've seen, non-presentationally justified. Compare: 'I think I saw Jon crying, but I'm not sure if he was crying or actually laughing'. The uncertainty precludes rephrasing 'I saw Jon crying' as 'I saw that Jon was crying', which would indicate *fact* perception. Given the dichotomy, 'Jon crying' refers to an *object* of perception. Luckily, on this view, objecthood is a broad church. Here is Dretske (1999, p. 121):

> [T]oken events, states, and conditions are spatio-temporal particulars which are (like apples and stars) distinct from both the facts and properties from which I distinguish objects. Events and conditions have a (temporal) beginning and an end. Properties do not. Neither do facts. As Dostoyevsky put it, a person's suffering (an event or condition) ends, but the fact that the person suffers endures forever.

If the *fact* that a person suffers has no beginning or end, it cannot be non-epistemically seen. Only entities with a spatiotemporal location – 'spatiotemporal particulars' – can be seen like this. The reason is that seeing things non-epistemically is a primitive, non-belief-involving state, one to be understood as part of the causally closed, non-minded course of reality. It is a process or event as primitive, in Dretske's words, as that of stepping on things (2000, p. 101).

A similar ontological category to Dretske's category of events, states, and conditions is that of 'situation'. Here is Timothy Williamson (2000, p. 38):

> There is a distinction between seeing that A and seeing a situation in which A. One difference is that only the former requires the perceiver to grasp the proposition that A. A normal observer in normal conditions who has no concept of chess can see a situation in which Olga is playing chess, by looking in the right direction, but cannot see *that* Olga is playing chess, because he does not know what he sees to be a situation in which Olga is playing chess.

When coupled with a that clause, 'see' is what Williamson (op cit., p. 34) calls a *factive* mental state operator. This is why seeing 'that A' counts as *fact-seeing*. But seeing 'a situation in which A' falls under what Dretske calls object-seeing.

Situations seem to have, along with states, events and conditions, a place in the list of entities that count as *objects* of awareness in Dretske's sense even though they're not ordinary material particulars. Hence they cannot be put together with factive mental state operators such as 'see that'. Dretske requires objects to be spatiotemporal particulars, and he assumes that events, for instance, are. Williamson seems to assume the same thing about situations. So only spatiotemporal particulars can be referred to by the complement of a perceptual report that expresses non-epistemic seeing, which is to say – again – that only *they* can be objects of perception.

So much seems intuitive enough. The intuition dovetails with Mumford and Gow's assurance that absences cannot be veridically experienced, since only spatiotemporal particulars bounce light off, vibrate, etc. Perhaps absence experience can be made sense of in terms of *fact* perception, according to this view (recall, indeed, Mumford and Gow are cognitivists), just like the experience of the boundedness of our visual field can be made sense of in terms of seeing *that* one's visual field is bounded. Neither of those involves an object being presented. Yet to leave it at that would be to ignore the difference in phenomenology between contrast pairs I pointed out to in the (conceivable) scenarios above. This is because it is *objects* to which we typically attribute the *ways* of appearing that explain such differences. And it precludes absence seeing being non-epistemic, too, which it intuitively *can* be.[22]

These two problems are interrelated. If we posit an object of perception out there filling the other place of the two-place relation, we can, as per the object/fact dichotomy, unproblematically regard it as non-epistemically seen. We can then associate the different *ways* of appearing that explain intersubjective differences with *that* object.

Absences are not spatiotemporal particulars, so this schema of explanation is not available in absence experience. Might there be a way to give absences, as 'ways the world is', to borrow Mac Cumhaill's words, a role in veridical experience, then?

3. Ways the world is

3.1

It will be no surprise, given the amount of argument collected so far to the contrary, that my attempt at defending the veridicality of absence experience will seem radical. In one of the sections of the work that inspires this attempt, Mark Johnston himself asks, 'is this madness?'

The idea Johnston fears will be received as mad is that presence – 'the variety of ways in which real or ostensible items, be they objects, qualities or whatever,

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[22] Except for Gow's (op cit.), I haven't encountered any view to the contrary. For a classic discussion of how absence perception can be non-epistemic, see Sorensen (2008), pp. 246-47.

disclose some aspect of their nature' (Johnston 2004, p. 233) – is independent of the mind, or 'objective', in Johnston's phrase. By 'presence' Johnston means something like what Russell (1910-1911, p. 108) meant by 'presentation', which yields the thought that presence or presentation is a relation between an object and a subject, and so that presence 'is fundamentally presence to something, a self or subject of experience' (Johnston op. cit., p. 257).

On this familiar view, because an object is present to a subject only when and where the subject is, presence is a 'local phenomenon' (p. 234), and it is brought about by a mind's entering a perceptual relation with reality.[23] This predicts presence to cease to exist whenever 'the last individual consciousness' does. It is minds that are the 'Producers of Presence' (tongue-in-cheek capitals Johnston's). The mad proposal is that minds are not producers but rather 'Samplers of Presence'. Reality is already there, available to be sensed by us; facts about a subject do contribute to the explanation of her experience of reality but only in that they illuminate the subject's particular viewing conditions. In the case, for example, of looking up from one's desk and seeing 'one's dogs running in the front yard […] the perceptual experience is of the dogs and their running being present in a certain way' (p. 233). This 'certain way' includes the dogs looking oblong rather than square, if they are running sideways rather than towards the window; it includes their fur looking bright and reddish rather than matte and brownish, if the sun is out. All these are, in Johnston's Fregean phrase, 'modes of presentation' of what one sees. But what one sees has those modes of presentation built-in: 'all the possible ways of […] 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' (p. 235).

Where for Frege a mode of presentation is something like a description an object uniquely satisfies, such that it (the mode of presentation) is an entity associated with the thinking subject, something *she* contributes to the phenomenon of reference, for Johnston a mode of presentation '*is just* […] some item or other in the world, presenting in a certain manner' (p. 246). Johnston speaks of modes of presentation being 'perspectival'. One might read this to mean more than just the geometrical feature of a scene looking a particular way from a particular point of view, because the notion of 'point of view' seems to include, for him, more than a spatial position. 'Each one of us finds him or herself at the center of an arena of presence and action', Johnston writes (p. 260). His examples do involve geometrically perspectival differences among the ways in which one and the same thing appears to differently-positioned subjects, but it is natural to include other differences, too: a creature with a different number of cones in their visual system will be sensitive to different changes than I, in my conditions, might be sensitive to when

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[23]Two clarifications: Johnston swerves between calling our side of the relation 'mind' and 'consciousness'; and he thinks presence can be also an intellectual phenomenon, not just perceptual, as when propositions are 'THERE, […] available as objects of attention' (p. 234). I focus on the perceptual case, which he also thinks is 'the best way to bring presence into view' (ibid.).

the dog scene goes from sunny to cloudy. Or someone with more training than I would be sensitive to a taste I am not when sampling wine. Johnston deals with this phenomenon by positing a distinction between the *properties* some item has, say the surface reflectance profile of an object (which we refer to via the colour words), and the *qualities* we are perceptually aware of when sensing the item in a particular occasion (which we, confusingly, also talk about using those words). A green thing can have a blue-ish *quality* in certain conditions and for certain subjects, even though it does not have the *property* of being blue.

This distinction between properties and qualities seems idiosyncratic, but it is important to the idea of presence being 'sampled', not 'produced', so let me put the point in the more familiar terms of things having similar appearances or looks (Martin 2010). On such a view, to us and in certain appropriate conditions, the flower will have a look that is similar to that of paradigmatic blue things. Looks ascriptions like '*o* looks blue' do not pick out one particular property borne by all blue-looking things; rather, there are various, distinct ways of looking, for example one borne by a blue flower and one by an ultra-violet flower, which are qualitatively similar. Experiencing the blue look of the ultraviolet flower as distinct from the blue look of a bluebell accounts for the intuitive intransitivity of the similarity relation. A looking similar to B and B to C does not entail A looking similar to C. This intransitivity wouldn't be respected if we ascribed one and the same look to all blue-looking things. So Martin's view, like Johnston's, posits a two-layered kind of perceptual contact with presented objects. Items have basic properties, say shape and colour, and in virtue of having these, items have looks. Now, we don't perceptually access looks *rather than* things themselves and their basic properties; that's not what the two-layered view of perceptual contact means. What it means is that there is, as we might pre-theoretically think, a distinction between appearance and reality, both of which are aspects of what we see. A stick can be actually straight but look bent if half-submerged, for example, and the bent look is similar to the look of actually bent things. In *that*, the stick strikes us as having something in common with them. But its straightness also plays a role in our experience: the stick wouldn't look bent when submerged if it weren't straight, after all.

The point that presence is objective can be put in these new terms by saying that both being and appearance – both being straight and looking bent – are objective features of things. Whether or not we accept Johnston's quality/property distinction, we can accept the point that appearances don't come into existence when reality is perceived. Appearances, or the ways reality discloses itself, are independent of our experience. The fact that appearance is 'perspectival' (in the comprehensive sense of the term) isn't at odds with this. Reality itself has several 'modes of presentation', in Johnston's terms, or 'looks', in Martin's, or 'appearances', more generally; and different subjects in different conditions will access different such modes, looks, or appearances. That a red apple has a green-ish look is still true of it

even when there is no colour-blind subject in the context to access that look.[24] The apple is present in that way in any case.[25]

What if absence is no different from presence in Johnston's sense? Just as we sample, not produce presence, so too we sample absence. A lesson from the discussion in this section so far is that it is a pervasive feature of experience that we access reality in different *ways*, because reality is readily present to us in those ways. So perhaps we access absences in different *ways* too because different things fail to be present in different ways.

Consider extending the idea that Johnston samples his dogs running in the front yard in a particular way, whatever 'dogs running' refers to (a state, an event, or fact), to the idea that the dogs' being absent is also something Johnston could sample, also in different ways. If the dogs' presence is 'the variety of ways in which [the dogs] disclose some aspect of their nature', the dogs' absence would be 'the variety of ways in which [the dogs] fail to disclose any aspect of their nature'. Johnston might access one of the ways the dogs disclose some aspect of their nature, and Johnston's friend, who is colour-blind, another such way. Similarly, the two of them access different ways for the dogs to fail to disclose any aspect of themselves. To Johnston, those dogs' absence might feel overwhelming; it might come with a deafening silence, which he has to get out of the house to stop sensing. (I'm thinking of a dog-bereaved Johnston.) To Johnston's friend, who disliked them, the absence might feel quite differently. Both are just sampling different ways in which the dogs fail to disclose themselves, which is just as much an objective, sampleable way for the world to be as the dogs being present in the backyard at that time is.

Now, suppose Johnston liked one dog better than the other, and conversely his friend. Suppose Johnston looks up at the front yard and sees one dog only. Suppose, too, the dogs are identical twins. Perhaps before he looks closely, the absence of his favourite dog, Pierre, will look to Johnston similarly to the way the absence of the other dog, Paul, looks to Johnston's friend. They both look up at the same time and feel the same pang of dread upon seeing the one-dogged yard (what happened to Pierre/Paul? Did he stay at the vet? I'd swear they were in the garden together!). This means Paul's absence has a way of being experienced that is similar to Pierre's absence, just like red and orange objects have similar ways of looking.

Another situation. Only Pierre is absent from the house. Because Pierre is Johnston's favourite, Johnston knows what Pierre's little paws running to meet him sound like on the parquet; Johnston's friend doesn't. So when they both come into the house, only Johnston recognises Pierre's absence, because only he knows that the

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[24] That such a look-ascription is true in that context is compatible with its being non-assertible in that context, because no one is sensitive to it there. Cf. Martin (op cit.).

[25] As Umrao Sethi (forthcoming) notes, this might mean that, for all we know, items have potentially infinite ways of being experienced, only some of which we access in certain conditions. This plenitude is less problematic than it seems if one remembers appearances are not to be counted as further elements to the object and its properties themselves. An object has ways of being experienced, which are relational properties, in virtue of its basic, non-relational ones.

paws they hear approaching do not include Pierre's. This, again, doesn't mean Pierre's absence is somehow subjective to Johnson. The absence is there, available to be detected, only Johnston's particular make-up is to Pierre's absence as a hummingbird's to ultraviolet, or a sommelier's to a complex wine.

Now, one feature of absence experience is that it's recalcitrant, i.e. it remains even when one's beliefs are incompatible with it. This seemed to speak to Mumford's and Gow's view of it as an illusion: just as the illusion that the Müller-Lyer arrows are different lengths remains when one learns they are the same length, so too the experience the experience *as of* my laptop being absent remains even when one learns the laptop is there, and a magician is just playing a mirror trick. This phenomenon would be explained, on the present proposal, by the two ways of the world to be – the laptop being there and its being absent – having similar ways of being experienced. This means, again, that they can be experienced similarly in different sets of viewing conditions, just like Pierre's absence feels similarly to Johnston as Paul's absence does to his friend. The presence of Gow's laptop there – that way for the world to be – looks to her, tricked by the magician, similarly to how someone's laptop's being absent looks to someone who isn't being tricked but was in fact robbed of it.

Consider the case of total darkness. Light's being absent looks to humans black. Such seems to be the result of our possessing a pre-Newtonian visual system. But it might look different to a creature with a post-Newtonian visual system. Both are ways of total darkness' being experienced. Light's failure to disclose itself feels different to subjects with different kinds of visual systems. And someone might have access to no ways of a certain absence to be experienced at all. Consider our Construct user. She is aware of the emptiness around her, we had said, in virtue of her awareness of the boundedness of her visual field. This made it seem like her experience was fully explicable without appeal to anything being presented to her; however, on the present view, that subject's ability to be aware of her sensory limits helps to make her *sensible* to the emptiness around her. A creature with no such ability – with no ability to be aware of her sensory limits – would likely not be sensitive to the emptiness around her in the Construct. Even though the belief that the region in view is a sub-region of a larger space is not defeated by the typical defeaters of perceptual beliefs, it is still not an a priori belief. If a subject had been born in the Construct but never opened her eyes, say, or had been born without them, she wouldn't have been able to visually acquire that belief. The emptiness would have been there, but she could have failed to sense it. If Martin (1998) is right that one does not have perceptual awareness of empty space through the body, moreover (as when, for instance, one holds out one's hands), then such a subject would not sense the emptiness by touch either.

3.2

If absence experience can vary in the way ultra-violet-flower experience can, and such variation is explained by there being *something* one is aware of such that *it* has those

various ways of being experienced, then what plays this role? We have seen it may not be an object in the Dretske-Williamson sense, because absences are not spatiotemporal particulars (like Mac Cumhaill's absential locations are); nor is it a fact, because unlike fact perception, absence experience can be non-epistemic. Whatever it is, we know it must contribute to the character of the relevant kinds of experiences, such that the variation between contrast pairs is at all possible.

My Johnstonian answer to the above question is that in absence experience one is aware of a 'way the world is', to borrow MacCumhaill's words. This may sound imprecise (and indeed it is), but my aim here has been accordingly modest. It was to carve out some room in logical space for absence experience to be veridical. To this end, I have argued that, whatever exactly their nature, absences have, like presences, the role of bearing ways of being experienced. Such a role needs to be fulfilled if the differences between contrast pairs are to be accounted for.

In the remainder of the paper, though, I want to venture some positive observations. One first thing to note is that absence being like Johnstonian presence entails the denial that perceptual awareness is necessarily of an object, which dovetails in turn with Johnston's denial that presence is necessarily to a subject. The compatibility of the two denials can be seen as follows. If objects' ways of being experienced are *there*, available for us to sample, then those ways can fail to be sampled by some subject. Such is part of the concept of availability. Similarly, a subject who is perceptually open to the world can fail to exploit such openness with regard to some object, i.e. to fail to sample its presence, because the subject does not come into contact with the object or because the object has no way of being experienced to which the subject is sensitive.[26] Yet, in some occasions in which presence fails to be sampled, perceptual openness is nevertheless exploited, albeit by a sampling of an absence itself.

Let me unpack this paragraph by taking, in turn, the rejection that perceptual awareness is necessarily of an object and how it is that the openness unexploited by presence is occasionally exploited in sampling an absence itself. Following Phillips (op cit.), we can cash out the rejection of the view that perceptual awareness is necessarily of an object in two – distinct but compatible – ways. The first is as challenging diaphaneity. As Phillips puts the target view, '[i]f experience can entirely be analyzed in terms of its objects, then where there is no object, there is no experience' (Phillips op cit., p. 345). His own argument to reject this, which he employs to defend the idea that absence can be experienced in audition (i.e. that silence can be experienced), is to say that, analogously to how sight makes us aware of a visual field independently of any objects standing there, in audition we can be aware of a temporal extension independently of any sounds extending over it. A subject whose experience consists solely in this soundless temporal extension differs

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[26] This might be the situation in our experience of total darkness. There might indeed be some light present in the region of space perceived, but not enough for human vision to register perceptually.

from a deaf subject in that in such an experience she, unlike the latter, is perceptually open for a sound to make itself present.[27]

Now, the other way of denying that perceptual awareness is necessarily of an object is by rejecting that there are sharp boundaries between perceptual modalities. The following goes beyond Phillips' point, but the thought occurs to one from reading him that if a deaf person develops a hypersensitive sense of touch that allows her to be aware of sounds by their vibrations, then she, too, will be able to experience silence. So the hearing and the deaf may experience one and the same thing – the same absence – differently, which is to say that one and the same absence will have those two ways of being experienced. And it does so in virtue of what it is an absence of. Part of the nature of sounds is that they can fail to disclose themselves in different ways to differently sensitised subjects: in silent and in vibrationless ways, respectively.

This example takes me to the second point I wanted to unpack: that sometimes, the openness unexploited by presence can be exploited by sampling an absence itself. Here is where structural features of experience come in. In addition to having, as we saw, an epistemic role in our experiences of absence, structural features have a role in explaining character. The two roles are related. The kind of knowledge we gain in absence experience, I suggested before, can be regarded as negative knowledge. It is knowledge about what is not presented to us in experience. This knowledge does not have, by definition, a 'presentational' justification, to use Alford-Duguid's phrase: it is precisely knowledge about what is not presented. But we saw that it has a different, still perceptual kind of justification: 'structural'. The negative knowledge in question tends to be specific, though; it tends to encode information about what the experience is not of.

Let me illustrate this point by showing how different structural features help in our acquisition of knowledge about different kinds of absences in the examples we have discussed. One structural feature of experience is that it makes us aware of a temporal extension (which functions as something like an auditory field). This feature sensitises us to the absence of *auditory objects* (but it has no role in our sensitivity to the absence of visual objects). Another structural feature is that in experience we detect the edges of materials. This helps to explain our awareness of the absence (of material) located in, or identified with, holes. Another feature of our visual system is that it is pre-Newtonian. This helps to explain our awareness of darkness. And the feature of having a figure/ground structure helps to explain our awareness of the absence of individuals, which can fail to appear on a ground. Finally, the feature of visual experience consisting in the fact that during it we are aware of the boundedness of the visual field helps to explain our awareness of a more general absence, the absence of any visual objects (as in the Construct). So, generally, the structural features of experience *do*, as predicted by the literature, have a role in explaining our phenomenology during absence experience; yet this phenomenology is not exhaustively explained by citing those structural features. An absence has to be

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[27] Phillips (op cit.), pp. 344-57.

cited as being sampled or sensed. The structural features of experience are just part of what makes us perceptually receptive to them.

4. Homing in

Recall that this proposal is inspired by Johnston's remark that we are samplers, not producers, of presence. This is the 'objective', or anti-psychologistic, character of Johnston's view. A few remarks are thus in order on the objectivity or anti-psychologism of the proposal that we are samplers, not producers, of absence.

4.1

The first set of remarks take the form of a defence against illusionism. The possibility might seem open for the illusionist to explain what we've called 'contrast pairs' in terms of differences in how illusory aspects of experience affect the subjects' phenomenology. For example, the illusionist might say: Johnston experiences Pierre's absence differently from his friend – when both do experience it – not because both are differently equipped to sample it but because the illusion on him is different from the illusion on her.

The problem with this move isn't its subjectivist character *per se* (explaining absence experience by appeal merely to the subject is precisely the spirit of the view we are opposing here); the problem is that this subjectivist character overburdens the illusionist with individual explanations for each individual's illusory phenomenology. To see the problem, compare an error theorist about colour. This theorist might explain the difference between a hummingbird's and my experiences of the same flower by appeal to the way the hummingbird's and my perceptual systems each commit their own kind of systematic errors. In virtue of our perceptual systems' differences, the hummingbird's and my visual field have different properties that we each 'project' onto the flower, thus resulting in our respective erroneous experiences of the flower as ultravioletish and blue-ish (cf. e.g. Boghossian and Velleman 1989/1997). Illusionists about absences cannot appeal to such systematicity because there is no one (non-cognitive) phenomenon they posit as taking place instead of veridical perception in the way illusionists about colour posit what they call 'projection', our experience's representing a quality of the visual field as inhering in physical objects. Mumford's proposal for what is going on – that the subject's own inference seems to her to be a perceptual experience – would leave the phenomenological differences across contrast pairs unaccounted for. Why exactly would I, but not a creature with a different perceptual system, experience total darkness as the illusion of a black expanse? Same goes for Gow's account. Why would the same intellectual seeming manifest as a black experience in my case, but differently in another creature?

This incapacity to account for phenomenological differences is not coincidental. Illusionism about absences is, as suggested earlier, qualifiedly *cognitivist*,

whereas an error theory about colour still explains colour experience in terms of a non-cognitive phenomenon.[28] This means her explanation still appeals to the subject's environment. The illusionist about colour does not deny the literal existence of the objects we see when we see coloured objects, nor that the qualities we predicate of them are in fact true of some entity relevant to the experience; all she does is redirect our attention to where she thinks those qualities really inhere. The elements of explanation are kept fixed across cases: there is always (i) the subject's visual field, (ii) an object of perception, and a (iii) mismatched or misattributed quality. Change the subject's perceptual apparatus (the human's for the hummingbird's) but keep the object fixed and you'll get a non-mysterious phenomenological difference.[29]

By contrast, the illusionist about absences, having denied the existence of the target object of experience, does not have such fixed elements to explain phenomenological differences across cases. Each deluded subject's case seems to require an *ad hoc* explanation. But absence experience is too systematic a phenomenon for this. Whereas we (in the last paragraph of the last subsection) have made suggestions as to how the different structural features of experience help to explain different kinds of experience of objectively existing absences, for the illusionist there is no entity out there to contribute to explaining what's different and what's common between Johnston and his friend's experience (encountering Pierre's absence), a pre- and a post-Newtonian visual creature's (encountering total darkness), and so on.

But the illusionists' efforts were motivated, in part, by a desire to avoid a commitment to mysterious entities. Would the explanatory issue I've raised against illusionist theories be worth the benefit of remaining free of such commitments? Gow and Mumford put their avoidance as stemming from a familiar causal contact condition on perception – as well as broadly 'physicalist leanings', as Gow puts it (op cit., p. 170; cf. fn. 2 above). Only physical objects have causal powers; only objects with causal powers could be perceived. 'To perceive something is to enter into a causal relation with it', writes Mumford (op cit., §7.3.3); '[v]eridical visual perception involves objects reflecting photons which then interact with the photoreceptors which compose the retina', writes Gow, 'and veridical auditory perception involves vibrating objects causing sound waves which enter our ears, and so forth' (op cit., p. 171). How would an anti-illusionist view fare with respect to such a laudable physicalist/causalist conviction? The first thing to say is that the causal condition on perception needn't be as binding as the illusionist thinks; the second, that it isn't clear physicalism is in tension with a veridicalist view of absence experience.

The details of these two ideas point us to broader debates within the philosophy of perception and metaphysics – an indication, in turn, that veridicalism

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[28] The perceiver is diagnosed with the false *belief* that the relevant qualities are instantiated on the surfaces of objects, yes, but this is a result of the projection occurring as a part of the visual experience.

[29] Needless to say, our sympathies are still not with the illusionist but with the dispositionalist about colour (see Johnston 1992).

about absence experience isn't alone in facing the kind of protests pressed by the illusionist. Consider, regarding the first idea, that there are ways to complicate, rather than meet, the causal condition as it stands. One first way might be to offer a view of perception on which the relevant causal arrow doesn't stem from the perceived object. If one thinks that the crucial aspect of seeing an object is to receive information about it through a visual channel (Dretske 1981), then there are cases in which this occurs without the seen thing being the cause of the transfer of information but rather by its being caused by the same event that causes the transfer. Call this a 'common cause' theory of perception (Ganson 2021). Another way might be to offer a more sophisticated version of the explanandum, such that what is to be explained is not one's perceptual contact with an object (which seems to have the causal condition built-in) but one's acquisition of perceptual knowledge about it.

Consider, here, cases where demonstrative thought is made available by perception but in which the relevant perceptual link is not *caused* by the object referred to by the demonstrative term. A first example shouldn't be too controversial: consider two stable workers who come upon an empty stall: 'where is that horse?', one asks; 'That horse is out pasturing', the other responds. The thoughts were prompted by perception and the demonstrative term refers to an existent object; yet, the perceptual link that enabled the thoughts did not have the relevant object at the other end.[30] A second example is perhaps less obvious but also plausible. Consider a young student who exclaims, upon first encountering an irregular figure in his geometry textbook: 'that shape is weird!'. The thought is not about the marks on the page but about an abstract object, the same thing the teacher takes up reference to when she replies to the student: 'yes, that shape is *irregular*'. In both cases, the object referred to is not perceptually available to the subject in the way objects in ordinary demonstrative contexts are; nevertheless, there are ways to make sense of the idea that there is a perceptual *link* to them here, albeit one that is more complicated than the kind a simple causal interaction between an object's surface and the subject's retina usually establish.[31]

We shall of course not settle the question of whether the causal condition should be respected in the way Mumford and Gow insist here. Their allegiance to it stems, at any rate, from avowedly salutary 'physicalist leanings'. But what do these leanings amount to? What, exactly, would it take to fail by them? Assuming, plausibly, that 'physicalism' refers to a theory on which all the facts are physical, the debate turns at this point to familiar questions on whether allowing apparently non-physical (*phenomenal*) facts in our metaphysics amounts to denying physicalism – because it would amount to denying that 'complete physical knowledge is complete knowledge simpliciter', as Frank Jackson writes (1986, p. 291). Something like this

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[30] For one account of the first case according to which perception is involved in making salient a relation that holds between the demonstrative's index and the object of reference, see Georgi (2012). In ordinary cases, that relation is identity, in others, such as this case, it will be a more complex one. See also Nunberg (1993) on deferred reference.

[31] For an account according to which the role of perception is to establish a link between the subject and the (abstract) object via the latter's concrete tokens, see Juvshik (2018).

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slogan, which Jackson tells us 'physicalists must hold', is what illusionists think is violated by veridicalism about absence experience. 'Perception of physical entities is perception simpliciter'.

A response that doesn't challenge physicalism but appeals to a less rigid notion of what 'physicalist leanings' may amount to is available in recent metaphysics by Alex Moran (2023), who draws on work by Jonathan Schaffer (2009, 2017, ms). The idea is that there is a distinction to be drawn between 'narrow' and 'broad' physical facts (Moran), or 'material' and 'physical' ones (Schaffer). This allows us to recognise phenomenal facts – and the relevant properties and entities – to be physical because they are metaphysically grounded in underlying fundamental, 'narrowly physical' (Moran) or 'material' (Schaffer) facts – and the relevant properties and entities.[32] Importantly, this does not mean the broadly physical or non-material is trivial. In learning what seeing red is like, for instance, Mary enters a genuinely new cognitive relation with a new 'portion of reality', as Moran puts it: metaphysical grounding is not reduction.

It seems plausible that facts about absence experience are grounded in facts about what those absences are of. For example: earlier, I said that one and the same absence – a silence – may have two ways of being experienced (for the hearing and the deaf) *in virtue* of what it is an absence of. It is exactly this locution – 'in virtue of' – metaphysicians take to be captured by theories of metaphysical grounding. To access both facts about one such absence, then – the fact that it is perceivable in a vibrationless way and the fact that it is perceivable in a silent way – is to access facts that are grounded in facts about sound. And to access facts about absences – which are grounded in facts about what those absences are of – *via experience* might be to access certain experientiable properties of those absences.

What are such 'experientiable properties'? Here the answers will vary. Plausibly, just as facts about absence might depend on facts about what they are absences of, so absences' properties will depend on properties of what they are absences of. To stay with the case of silence, it will be helpful to consider Ian Phillips, Chaz Firestone and Rui Zhe Goh's (2023) recent empirical work favouring 'the perceptual view (we literally hear silence)' and disfavouring 'the cognitive view (we only judge or infer silence)' (p. 1). The key result of their experiments is that the auditory silence perception works in the same way perception of sounds does: by way of 'auditory event segmentation', a mechanism that wouldn't be observed in subjects' perceptual systems if the experience of silence were a matter of mere inference (p. 5). Phillips, Firestone and Goh do not take a stance on the metaphysics of silence, but because silence is the absence of sound, and sound is temporally extended, silence is perceived to be temporally extended, too.

A (speculative) word on the kind of entity absences might be more generally is coming up in the next subsection. To recap: my defence against an illusionist

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[32] The grounding relation is often discussed as holding between facts in this literature, but we can also speak of it as holding between properties or first-order entities (cf. Schaffer 2009, MacBride 2022). The point is, at any rate, to recognise different metaphysical levels – different 'portions of reality' – with which we may have cognitive contact.

backlash is twofold. First, I've pointed out that illusionism's subjectivist character overburdens it with individual explanations for each individual's illusory phenomenology, which, given the cognitive explanation it offers, it cannot handle in the way illusionism about colour can. Secondly, I've sketched some ways to assuage the worry that illusionism, but not veridicalism, can do justice to physicalist metaphysics. First: there are ways to resist the assumption that perceptual knowledge about some entity necessarily involves causal contact with it. Second, there are ways to resist the assumption that only the material counts as physical. Swift as these sketches may be, they point to ways in which similar issues arise in broader debates in philosophy of perception and metaphysics – a connection that is not surprising given that, as I will suggest now, absences are not the only kind of entities that defy a narrow physicalist ontology in ordinary experience and in the discourse with which we report it.[33]

4.2

It bears emphasising that are not simply replacing what fulfils the role of object of perception here. As suggested in Section 2, popular views like Dretske's, while indeed employing the notion of 'object' formally, take a stance on what can actually fulfil the role. It is, one suspects, for similar assumptions that authors have taken absences not to be possible objects of perception. Even granting absences exist, one realism-friendly view, Mac Cumhaill's, held that only spatiotemporal particulars such as absential locations can fulfil that role. Here I've suggested that absences themselves, which may in fact fail to meet the assumed criteria for objecthood, can be veridically experienced. I've remained neutral as to how exactly to make sense of such a perceptual state. One reason to be wary of making sense of it as fact perception is that absence experience can occur non-epistemically. One reason to be wary of making

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[33] A related worry alluded to, albeit briefly, by Gow is worth mentioning. A 'perceptual view' of absence experience faces the challenge of being 'compatible with the theory of evolution by natural selection', she writes (p. 171), assuming – one suspects – that only a narrowly physical metaphysics, to use Moran's phrase, is compatible with natural science. Where would this leave the results of Phillips, Firestone and Goh's work? Acknowledging that the physical needn't be material allows one to insist that silence perceivers were not in perceptual contact with mysterious entities. But how did evolution prepare them to be sensitive to such things? Here our discussion of differently constituted perceivers may be helpful. We may have evolved to experience seeing darkness as we do the failure to see because in both cases we are compelled to proceed with caution, to hear more attentively, to rely on our other senses. A creature with different needs – with a different natural history altogether – may have evolved to experience the same absence differently. In this, absence experience is no different from our and the hummingbird's different experiences of flowers. This is not the place to speculate on the relation between different life-forms' natural histories and their differing experiences of one and the same shared world. Suffice it to say that veridicalism – or what Gow calls a 'perceptual view' – needn't be incompatible with the theory of natural selection or with science more generally – as illustrated by Phillips, Firestone and Goh's work.

sense of it as object perception is that objects of perception, in the Dretske-Williamson sense at least, are simply not 'there' for perceptual attention to alight on in absence experience.

The more general, and admittedly vaguer phrase that absence is 'a way the world is' is flexible. But so is the notion of presence. Let me turn to Johnston's suggestions about presence, aided by Umrao Sethi's (forthcoming) recent development of Johnston's view, to shed some light on what we experience when we experience absence.

One thing Johnston tells us is one aspect of the view he opposes is that presence is a 'local phenomenon', but by *that* he means that presence doesn't come into being when an item is presented to a subject. His point is that things' being present was a phenomenon already happening there. In this sense, then, presence *is* in fact local. So much is admitted by Mac Cumhaill for the converse of presence, in fact: absences are 'ways the world is at a particular locale'; only these local phenomena, she tells us, have no sensible properties. On Johnston's view, however, recall, it is qualities, not properties, that explain the character of our experience of items, such that Mac Cumhaill's remark doesn't obviously threaten entities without sensible properties like colour and shape.[34]

This can sound as though our perceptual contact with reality is mediated, and that we access just the quality layer of reality, not the layer of objects and properties themselves. To avoid getting ourselves into exegetical questions about Johnston's view, we can just rely, again, on the familiar view that things can have similar appearances or looks. This view, while not supposing such a mediated nature of perceptual contact, nevertheless posits a two-layered structure in the way appearances or looks are explained. Our experience of reality involves a perceptual relation to objects, which, in addition to non-relational properties like colour and shape, have, in virtue of those colours and shapes, certain relational properties, appearances or looks (or, to use a Johnstonian phrase, ways of presenting). These are properties objects manifest – but don't have or cease to have – relative to certain conditions: the subject's angle, the ambient light, and so on. If our experience of absence is also an experience of reality, we should expect this two-layered structure of experience to pervade it. And so it does. There is no physical object in such cases with which to associate looks or appearances (or rather 'narrowly physical' or 'material' object, as we can now say), but in this, I want to suggest absence experience is not alone. Not only objects have ways of being experienced: take particular property instantiations, or 'tropes'.

Consider the sentence 'John saw the beauty of the rock formation' (Moltmann 2013, p. 51). Beauty characterises, on the present view, a way something has of being experienced. In this case, that something is 'the rock formation', which Friederike Moltmann argues is not an event, state or situation but something else: a

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[34] To repeat: the flower's blue-ish quality explains our experience of it and its ultra-violet-ish quality explains the hummingbird's. The flower's property of having a certain reflectance profile explains *those* qualities at best.

trope. Tropes are abstract, not concrete, particulars. So tropes fail to meet the standard for (Dretske-Williamson) objecthood. Like absences, tropes fail to have sensible properties such as colour and shape. However, a trope can be experienced as beautiful: the experience reported by the above sentence needn't be regarded as illusory, and ascribing beauty to a trope needn't be regarded as false. And there may be other cases of items to which we ordinarily ascribe qualities in reports but lack sensible properties. Redness – the universal redness – is abstract, yet it is perfectly felicitous for Nabokov to write a sentence like, 'he felt a roaring redness fill his head'. And the referent of 'Jon crying', from an earlier example, can be an ugly or upsetting thing to see.

A metaphysics of these things isn't necessary to make the point that perceptual discourse defies the object vs. fact perception dichotomy introduced earlier on. That dichotomy seemed to be assumed by the rejection of absences as experientiable items. The referents of 'the rock formation', 'a roaring redness', and 'Jon crying' all fail to be sensible in the traditional sense – because they may be abstract or causally inert – and yet seem to contribute, with their ways of being experienced, to the character of our experience of them. Our attribution of qualities to those things in perceptual discourse is the consequence.

So, what kind of thing is an absence? The most natural thing to say is perhaps that absences are tropes. But this is because presences themselves, on Johnston's objectivist conception, are plausibly tropes, particular properties of objects instantiated in particular locations. While I don't mean to offer a theory of absence and presence here, a word on the metaphysical plausibility of Johnston's view of presence is helpful. Johnston's idea, recall, is that presence doesn't require a subject; it is an objective phenomenon. But presence is still attached to an object: the object's potentially infinite appearances or modes of presentation are the ways it reveals its presence. Thus Johnston is denying that presence is a two-place relation. Take an object, Pierre, and this non-relational property of his, presence. Together they make up a fact, the fact that Pierre is present at some location.[35]

On an absence-friendly metaphysics such as the one found in Jago and Barker (2012) and Jago (2011),[36] these two elements – this object and this property – are the same that make up a corresponding negative fact – the fact that Pierre isn't present, i.e. is absent, at some location – albeit via *anti-instantiation*. For Pierre to be absent in the garden is for him to anti-instantiate the property of being present there, or to fail to instantiate that property. Now, on Jago and Barker's sui generis view of facts, facts themselves are spatiotemporally located, such that the objective, local phenomenon presence is might just be the fact that Pierre is present at some location (ditto for his absence). On a view of facts as abstract, not spatiotemporally located things, the particular property of being present at that location Pierre instantiates is plausibly a trope.

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[35] Let's say the property includes the location.

[36] They, too, incidentally, argue against Mumford, only their target aren't his views against absence perception but against absences' existence (Mumford 2007).

There are other ways of making sense of the idea that presence is objective and doesn't require a subject. On Caspar Hare's (2009) view, for example, things have the property of being present relative to – we might say, indexed to – *my* perspective. If I am directly aware of Pierre, he is present; no need to specify that he's present to me. If someone *else* is aware of Pierre, but I am not, then Pierre is not present, *simpliciter*. On this view, 'I' just refers to whoever enjoys the perspective according to which we attribute presence to objects of direct awareness.

Barker and Jago's view involves a particular metaphysics of facts; Hare's, a particular – realist – metaphysics of the first-person perspective, which may be tied, in turn, to further metaphysical commitments.[37] These complications make it a good idea to remain neutral, for the moment at least, on the kind of phenomena presence and absence exactly are. But what we can agree on is that they are properties objects instantiate or anti-instantiate and that they do so at a locale. My suggestion is that just as an object's presence has various ways of being revealed to different subjects, so does its absence.

Now, on the Johnstonian view (again, further developed in Sethi op. cit.), it is from the appearance an object instantiates relative to particular viewing conditions that one's experience of it inherits its qualitative character, not from the object's intrinsic properties such as colour and shape. 'Our mental states inherit their qualitative character from the qualitatively rich world that exists out there', as Sethi puts it. This view is friendly to absences – but also to the referents of 'the rock formation', 'a roaring redness', and 'Jon crying' – in that these things, while not qualifying as Dretske-Williamson objects, can intuitively be ascribed modes of being experienced. Whatever grounds such properties of them will just be something other what grounds the modes of being experienced material things have.[38]

Now, the variety of things the Johnstonian framework acknowledges as entities we can experience – the variety of things it acknowledges the contribution of to the qualitatively rich world – is another reason to remain open about the sort of entity an absence is. But let me note that the fact that absences – like tropes – are *local* allows us to see a further interesting feature of absence experience: that it can be misleading. A present thing can be sampled as present or as absent at a place. For example, drawing from a case discussed again by Mac Cumhaill (2019), there is a way of sampling present animal bodies such that they do not disclose themselves as present to biologically-apt perceivers. This phenomenon, animal camouflage, is the paradigm of what she calls

[37] First-person realism has been noted to be tied to the view that the present time is metaphysically privileged, for example. See Hare (op cit) and Builes (forthcoming).
[38] One might worry about the fact that every spatiotemporal location in the universe includes the absence of every entity that doesn't occupy that spatiotemporal location. This is true, but we needn't imagine a plethora of absences crowding every space. Recall that absences are manifest relative to certain conditions. Just like the ways a red object has of being experienced are, while instantiated by the object, relative to certain features of the subject (such as whether the subject has a human perceptual apparatus, or a different one), so are the ways Pierre's absence has of being experienced, while instantiated by the absence, relative to certain features of the subject (such as the structural features surveyed). See Sethi op cit.

'visual evanescence', and it illustrates the surprising felicity of saying that something 'looks invisible'. Mac Cumhaill explains this counterintuitive result by rejecting an 'objectivist' view on the nature of looks, according to which it would be nonsense to say that something looks invisible because only material objects can have looks, and by endorsing instead Elizabeth Anscombe's 'intentionalist' view, according to which perceptual objects are not what we, from a third-person point of view, would ascribe perception of to subjects but rather 'what the perceiver might give in response to the question: 'What do you see?'' (op cit., 295).

 This is not the place to discuss that proposal in detail,[39] but the phenomenon of visual evanescence, which Mac Cumhaill rightly notes has been overlooked in the literature, can be accommodated by the present view, too, which is 'objectivist' not in the sense Mac Cumhaill opposes to her 'intentionalist' view – not in the sense, that is, in which a material object is required to be there to do the look-bearing – but in the sense in which presence and absence are objective or mind-independent. The explanation, on this view, would be that a present entity is being sampled, in the case of animal camouflage, as absent by the relevant biologically-apt perceiver: a potential predator, perhaps. Perceivers with a different make-up might not experience the animal as absent because their visual systems might not, say, expect light to fall on the dorsal part of the animal in the way our visual system does, such that it would not interpret an animal's countershaded pattern as part of the background (op cit., pp. 293-4).

 This particular example brings out the distinction between the disposition subjects have to sample certain ways of being experienced and the episodes in which those dispositions are exercised. And it brings out the fact that the conditions under which those episodes occur can vary, depending on factors both on the perceiver's and on the perceived entity's ends. Contrast the following presence and absence sampling cases: blue petals are multiply located, and an episode of ultra-violet-ish experience occurs when an apt subject, such as a hummingbird, encounters it. All that needs to happen is for the hummingbird's eyes to be unobstructed; her disposition to sample that presence is standing. Evanescent objects are not multiply located in this way. Biologically-apt perceivers might have a standing disposition to sample present animals in the evanescent way, but they won't do so until the animal actually activates that mode of being experienced – until the octopus or chameleon mimics their environment, until the bird hides. The conditions under which absence-sampling occurs vary, too. Pierre's absence is everywhere Pierre is not, but an episode of Pierre's-absence-experience occurs only when an apt subject, such as a Pierre-expecting person, encounters it. Her disposition to sample Pierre's absence is not standing. Conversely to the case of animal camouflage, whether the episode of sampling occurs depends on facts about the perceiver: whether she is expecting Pierre. This contrasts with the conditions under which darkness experience occurs:

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[39] It bears noting, however, that because the present view is not the one Mac Cumhaill opposes, it and hers are not incompatible. This is unsurprising: the Anscombean view is silent on how things are on the world side of the perceptual state.

our pre-Newtonian visual system comes with a standing disposition to sample the black appearance of darkness.[40]

4.3

The final thing I want to stress is that this view is intended to cover, but not to be limited to, visual perception, but it *is* intended *not* to cover what authors call 'cognitive phenomenology', at least as deployed when explaining a particular kind of experience, the experience of holding (non-perceptual) propositional attitudes, most notably beliefs. As the reader may have noticed, I have phrased the phenomenon in question as 'seeing', 'perceiving', and 'experiencing' absence.

  This may seem like a cheat, since authors who hold an illusion view still think we have an experience of absence, although it is not explained by appeal to anything we perceive. Take, for example, Gow's (op cit.) example of experiencing the absence of your best friend's text message congratulating you on your birthday. Among the rest of the text messages, you clearly have a sense of their one being missing. Suppose that we are not talking about the experience you have as you go through your day but rather when you get home at night, having forgotten your phone, and check the text messages.

  My intuition is that experiencing the absence of your best friend's name among the other names – you don't even open the messages; you just scroll through the names on the notifications screen – has an important perceptual component. What does your friend's failure to send a message look like (to you)? Like this! And it has a similar a way of being experienced as another way for the world to be: your friend's having sent the message and unwittingly turned her phone off before the message could go through. You could have, of course, learned by testimony that your friend didn't send a message (someone at home saw the notifications and told you), and held the belief that her message wasn't there. But the phenomenology of this experience is starkly different from the one of going through the notifications yourself, tired and alone at night, the screen glowing in the dark, and failing to find your best friend's name there. Many of the cases discussed here, as this one, rely on multimodal perception, and many will need to be explained partly by appeal of cognitive attitudes (expectations, again, or body schemas). This does not mean that in being exposed to absences, you are enjoying any less of a perceptual experience than you would be when exposed to your dogs running in the yard, or a beautiful rock forming. All those have different ways of being experienced, and depending on your viewing – or, more generally, experiencing – conditions, which may include your cognitive attitudes, you will access one such way.

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[40] Yet it is conceivable that some absence-sampling dispositions are not standing for some subject but, like Sartre's disposition to experience the absence of Pierre, can come on and offline. Perhaps one can program a robot to stop representing negative information, such that rather than seeing a hole in a sheet of paper, it only sees a further object in front of it.

Conclusion

Drawing on the idea that appearances can be objective features of the world, in this paper I've suggested that we need absences to bear objective appearances, which they can only do if they themselves are entities we veridically experience. Why do we need absences to bear objective appearances? Because objective appearances can help us to explain the phenomenal variation we may find in absence experience – the same kind we find in, say, experience of colour.

As the backdrop for this argument, I first make a strong case for the opposing view. I showed that illusionism about absence experience is supported not just by theorists explicitly targeting our phenomenon but also by considerations about the nature – the structural features – of experience itself. Hence, the challenge for veridicalism has been complex. I've sought to not only overcome the hostile theoretical environment for veridicalism but also to show how what is valuable about the hostile literature can be recovered within a veridicalist framework. In service of the former, I have elucidated illusionism's commitment to viewing absence experience as a species of object perception in the Dretske-Williamson sense; in service of the latter, I have argued that the structural features of experience we reviewed can indeed help to explain different kinds of experience of objectively existing absences.

An important result of this work is that we can finally take ordinary discourse at face value. On the illusionist view, reports like 'I see something black' when seeing total darkness, 'I see Pierre's absence' when seeing the one-dogged backyard, and 'I see something big' when seeing holes are all false. On a veridicalist view, these reports are true because they correspond to genuine experiences of absences: the way darkness, Pierre's absence and holes present to viewers all follow from the way the relevant, absent things fail to disclose themselves. Light fails, for example, to disclose itself in a way we experience by seeing total blackness (but some other creature might as seeing white); Pierre fails to disclose himself in a way that Johnston experiences as sad (but Johnston's friend, for whom Pierre was annoying, experiences as relieving); ink fails to disclose itself in a circular region on an otherwise black page in a way that we experience as a hole (but some other creature might experience as a white object). These are attributes of those entities just like a blue look is objectively an attribute of the ultraviolet-reflecting flower (even if a hummingbird experiences it as violet-ish), sadness of a piece of music (even if someone experiences it as dull), and thickness of the very piece of paper on which the absence of ink is.

Now, here I am perhaps assuming too much about the objective ways of being experienced of present things themselves. I am assuming sadness somehow lies in the music, for instance, and stubbornness in people, just as those can be attributes of absences. Let my view take the form of a conditional, then. If there is a way to make sense of my experiencing music as sad by attributing that way-of-being-experienced to the music itself, then there is a way to make sense of experiencing darkness as black, holes as big, and loved ones' absences as stubborn by attributing those way-of-being-experienced to the absences themselves.

This brings out two ways in which the view needs refining. One is the issue of how exactly absences can be experienced in any way if they have no basic sensible properties; another is the issue of how they can be experienced as stubborn or sad, if they can be experienced at all. Both, however, are issues that pertain to other kinds of entities too. What I have tried to do, at any rate, is to persuade the reader that such refining is worth pursuing, i.e. that a veridicalist view of absence experience is worth considering as an alternative to illusionism.[41]

I also hope to have conveyed the spirit of my motivation. The variety of ways in which absences are experienced seems as wide as the variety of ways in which present items are, and in perceptual reports we record both kinds accordingly. This is just a pervasive feature of our experience of the world. If absences are *there*, available to be sampled in different ways and become 'the topics of thought and talk', as Johnston says, then they contribute, via those different ways of being experienced, to our general phenomenology just as red things – via their now orange, now reddish appearance – do. The key to accord absences a place in the realm of entities we see thus may be to stop thinking of them as objects ought to strike our retinas. And perhaps to stop regarding sense experience as a phenomenon just as plain as stepping on things, too.[42]

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[41] Once the view is refined, a further line of research might concern the question of how the proposal relates to the representationalism v. naïve realism debate. Although I draw on philosophers who favour the latter, it isn't obvious I require it. A representationalist view such as Brogaard's (2018) might, for example, recruit the phenomenal difference between our contrast pairs for her cause: 'a perceptual relation between the perceiver and a mind-independent, external object does not suffice for explaining the different phenomenal seemings that one and the same perceptual object can give rise to in different individuals', she writes (p. 90). Interestingly, Brogaard would allow discourse ascribing appearances to absences to report a non-epistemic state, as the present view suggests. Of course, she would locate such appearances in the contents of our representation of the environment.

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