

QUESTIONS ON THE ABSENT WORLD (2.0.1)

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The following is based on correspondence with an academic during December 2019, who asked to remain anonymous for its publication. All questions are his, and all answers are mine. The subject matter for the questions is the first three sections of *The Absent World*.

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1. *What is the relationship between mind and world in your thesis? I mean, your view presents one of quite radical interiority.*

There are a number of ways that this relationship occurs in the essay. Firstly, there's a point where it says: "Sense responds to the real, it forges itself into the forms required by actual situations of worldly existence."¹ So sense, which can be understood as a core aspect of inner thought here, is in some way malleable, and the world provides an impetus towards the creation of new shapes.

There's also some material related to this question in section six. The basic point is that there is a transformational dimension in the operations of understanding: as far as changes in the way we understand affect our thought, there is also potential to change both ourselves as subjects and the world around us. This is explained in the context of understanding the ongoing actuality of the world that extends beyond us, referred to here as the *depth* of the world. The result of this can be that, in prompting us to reach into this actuality, we find what is other than the usual, habitual things that constitute the presence of what lies before us for the most part. So it is in this engagement with difference that our understanding may involve both the self-creation of a subject and the creation of a world. The essay describes this as "where depth may become, not merely a surface reality, a style, or image, but manifest in the self and its surroundings as reflections from within contexts that extend beyond the present."²

¹ *The Absent World* (2017). Available from: <https://www.andrewmilward.net/files/absent-world-1.0.0.pdf>, p. 2.

² P. 21.

The final section also includes the line “thought finding freedom in itself is thought finding freedom in the world.”³ The point that relates to your question here is that the interiority becomes exteriority: as thinking beings, in some sense our freedom in the world relies on our freedom of thought. The internal and the external are two sides of our being in the world. If we stand in the world with an internal freedom, we have in some way already stepped into it in the mode of an external freedom.

2. *Your notion of the word is powerful in so far as it floats and is malleable, but I wonder if ‘sense’ is being used interchangeably with ‘word’—if so I cannot see how you can maintain this, i.e. I believe word is language which is processed sense.*

In those terms, I do think that word is a primary form of sense, but I wouldn’t say they were exact synonyms. The term ‘sense’ is broader than ‘word’ because there is also the sense of objects upon which language rests, i.e. the objects that belong to our world do not appear for the most part as purely abstract and inert; objects mean something to us in the contexts of everyday life. As the essay explains: “The vision of a material object speaks, but not in the same voice as the written or spoken word.”⁴ The point here is that when we stop and question a visible thing, through the association with its name, it communicates to us what it is on the basis of its physical form.

In general, I use the term ‘sense’ to refer to a quasi-ontological category composed of thought, speech, language in general, and the meaning of things. Sense is not something that exists *in-itself*; it may even be reduced to physical factors when we understand the world in a purely objective way, but nonetheless, in our subjective experience of the world, we can think, speak, and read language which exists within the physical world but is also distinct from what is purely physical. Along with the category of sense, there is the category of the real; as a duality they are entangled in each other, but in such a way that the one cannot be immediately identified with the other. The basic ontological structure is that sense is sense and the real is real but both are *actual*. The world is composed of language and real things. In our subjective experience, sense does not occur as a purely physical body, nor do real things occur as pure significations.

3. *I wonder what your view is on the relationship between word and image.*

Images of things in the world (paintings, photographs, etc.) would belong to the category of the real, so the relationship between word and image is, under these terms, the relationship between sense and the real as its referent. So the discussion on the gap between sense and real things would also relate to images un-

³ P. 24.

⁴ P. 2.

derstood in this way.⁵ The main point is that language can never fully express an object; it must always generalise in some way. But this belongs to language itself: instead of attempting to explain every detail, it strikes at an object in the most economical way possible according to specific linguistic purposes.

In the essay, sense is primarily related to linguistic thought, so an internal image would involve another aspect of our thinking that we might call imaginative thought. This would still involve sense but in another form: like the meaning of things that we associate with their name, there is the sense of an internal image that forms its meaning. Here the relation to language again relates to the gap between sense and referent: there are always limitations when trying to express what we imagine in words.

4. *Your text reads as somewhat nostalgic, e.g. 'the absent world', 'grasping through the absent'. I use the term 'nostalgic' because absence, as I read it, is of something lost—am I correct?*

I would say that there's an important distinction in the essay between absence and the absent. The former is the focus of what the essay calls transcendental philosophy, which in remaining only with the *presence* of absence misses the absent itself.⁶ In these terms, absence occurs when we are aware of someone or something being missing in the present; the absent, however, is the unseen beyond our experience of any lack of presence that appears before us.⁷

In this way, the essay doesn't develop any specific relationship between nostalgia and the absent. The absent world includes what we have never seen, what we could never see, so there is nothing lost per se. Finite human existence necessarily means that there is a vast world that we have never had, never imagined, thought of or spoken about. This is described in section four as follows: "An entire world belongs to the absent, free from the limits of any singular viewpoint, continuing indefinitely beyond the existence of individuals, indifferent to their conditions and situation."⁸

5. *Your interiority is question begging in so far as word (language) is communal. I wonder how your philosophy addresses the word as communal.*

I agree that language is communal. There are a number of points that acknowledge this, for example: "Within the possible situations of a linguistic community, generalisation operates according to requirements of use."⁹ So we don't general-

⁵ See pp. 1–2.

⁶ P. 12.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ P. 4. See also p. 16.

ise purely on our own; we generalise to communicate, to achieve communal purposes. The ways in which we use language are grounded within our interactions with others.

Another example is where the phrase “from the standpoint of successful discourse” is used:¹⁰ the success in question is one rooted in our communal world. The essay also refers to the practicalities of language, which should be taken to imply *communal* practicalities.¹¹

6. What about embodiment? I ask this because I think being space and time bound limits our ability to think anything (this is my thought as a result of page seven).

I would say that embodiment is implicit throughout. In the first line, for example, it refers to the boundaries of vision:¹² we have these boundaries because we are embodied beings. There’s also a section that mentions the movements of thought that react to the open spaces experienced as ambiguous or empty, where there is a loss of our grasp on context, where there may be misheard voices or events partially seen.¹³ So these spaces belong to physical situations that we enter as embodied beings, but our grasp of the meaning of them, of the things that happen around us that aren’t entirely clear, can be limited.

The other point related to this is the embodiment of other people. Again this is implicit where it refers to the surface appearance of subjects,¹⁴ and elsewhere to their silent physical presence.¹⁵

7. I am interested in unpacking your notion of performance on page eight. In so far as sense is creative, how does this fit with my critique as offered in my point about embodiment above?

In the essay, performatives are another way to illustrate the operation of language in the world. As mentioned, embodiment is implicit throughout, so the way performatives operate in the world relates to this, i.e. our language, thought, and physical presence form an interrelated structure connected with our shared communal space. So the creativity here is a connection between sense and the real—our words effect physical changes in the world: “The real is created on the basis of [the performatives’] declarations; it is destroyed on the basis of their disclosures.”¹⁶ Real objects are created and destroyed through our linguistic discourse because we are embodied beings.

¹⁰ P. 1.

¹¹ P. 7. See also the discussion on the temporality of verbs (*ibid.*).

¹² P. 1.

¹³ P. 3.

¹⁴ P. 5.

¹⁵ P. 17.

¹⁶ P. 8.

8. Finally, what is the role of imagination? I get that you have a notion of abstraction, but isn't this what the imagination does?

The essay generally uses the term 'imagination' to imply speculation, but uses the term 'abstraction' in a number of different ways, i.e. to describe linguistic transformations,¹⁷ the abstraction of concepts as far as they may represent worlds of thought,¹⁸ the abstraction of pure logic as senses that refer to certainties within sense itself,¹⁹ and the example of scientific abstraction via the mathematical explanation of nature.²⁰ It might be possible to argue that all these can be reduced to the imagination, but creating something like a system of faculties—as we see in Kant for example—wasn't something I was aiming for.

I mentioned another way to understand the imagination in my answer to your question about images; the section entitled 'The Absent as Actual' is also important for this. This section explains that, in our thought on the actuality of the absent, although the latter is not perceived, it is in some way sensed: this thinking involves "the thought of a distant city understood as being there but not here, a city whose existence is actual as the unknown reality of the temporal present."²¹ The imagination is playing a subtle role here, but it's not quite as simple as imagining the vision of a city street in our heads. It's more about our *inability* to imagine every detail, every real thing in these circumstances that sends us towards what was discussed above: from the realisation of this actuality, we can gain another understanding of the world's depth.

From within this understanding of our relation to the world, a concept of depth can be developed, which is described in the essay as follows:

It is not a generalisation that defines according to what is manifest, but a general concept that names what is hidden among all things. It does not refer only to the present object but to its history, not only to the event but to its surrounding conditions. It names the unnamed, the beyond of attention, the outside of the present or the generalised. Its naming is not parsimonious, transparent to or complete within itself. It is never completed but continually refers to what is beyond itself.²²

This is where a unique movement in the gap between sense and referent occurs. Like the one we see in the metaphysical universal, it is a change that is somehow unnatural to language in general—or as the essay argues, impossible in terms of its referential operation—but in this case the unnaturalness is a key part of its

¹⁷ Section two, pp. 4–8.

¹⁸ P. 10.

¹⁹ P. 10 and p. 11.

²⁰ Pp. 10–11.

²¹ P. 13.

²² Pp. 17–18.

purpose.²³ The point here is that, when a metaphysical universal has being understood as the root and essence of the world as its referent, the referent itself has been transformed in a way that radically departs from everyday language. Here the gap between sense and referent is closed because, in the terms of classical metaphysics, thought is the same as being. In the case of the concept of depth, sense explicitly refers to that which is endlessly beyond linguistic generalisation; in this way generalisation itself is emphasised, pushed to extremes, to its breaking point.²⁴ When this unique movement of the gap between sense and referent becomes operative in our thinking, it illuminates the relationship between language and the world, preventing the operation of generalisations from remaining entirely unquestioned, creating a counterpoint to the way in which language for the most part effortlessly operates.²⁵ It is in this conceptual development that our understanding of the absent world changes; it is where a new understanding potentially becomes the ground of subjective and worldly transformation.

²³ Pp. 18–19.

²⁴ P. 18. For the critique of metaphysical universality, see pp. 11–12 and pp. 19–20.

²⁵ P. 19.