What We Hear

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It is widely assumed (and only rarely argued) that the principal objects of hearing are *sounds*. Thus, Roy Sorensen writes:

> In the course of demarcating the senses, Aristotle defined sound in *De Anima* as the proper object of hearing…. Sound cannot be seen, tasted, smelled, or felt. And nothing other than sound can be directly heard. (Objects are heard indirectly by virtue of the sounds they produce.) All subsequent commentators agree, often characterizing the principle as an analytic truth. For instance Geoffrey Warnock (1983: 36) says 'sound' is the tautological accusative of the verb 'hear'. (2010, 126)[1]

There are two main claims in this passage:

> (1) Sound is unique in that it cannot be seen, tasted, smelled, or felt, but only heard. That is, sound is the proper object of hearing.
> (2) Nothing other than sound can be directly heard. That is, if S hears E directly, then E is a sound.[2]

These claims are widely accepted, but I think that neither is true. I have only a few brief remarks to make about claim (1), which seems to me rather uninteresting, philosophically. Not so claim (2), which is the principal target of this paper. Claim (2) is the centerpiece of much contemporary philosophical and empirical work on hearing and sound. So, if it falls, it falls with company.[3]

§1. Seeing Sounds?

Claim (1) asserts that sounds are unique in that they cannot be seen, tasted, smelled, or felt, but only heard. I think this is easily shown to be false.

We often perceive things by perceiving their effects. Consider, for instance, the wind: otherwise invisible, we see it in rippling water and swaying branches. And even if we never see the wind directly, "indirect seeing" is still seeing; seeing the wind *on the water*, or *in the trees*, is still seeing the wind. This point is familiar from the philosophy of science: a properly-trained physicist can see a subatomic particle by seeing its trail in a cloud chamber. Sounds are similarly visible. Get yourself the right speakers and the right music and you'll be able to *see* the sound—in particular, the bass—by seeing the shaking glassware. And the same holds for other sensory modalities. Imagine an earplugged sleeper who wakes to a vibrating bed and removes his earplugs to discover that what he *felt* was the sound of the party downstairs.[4] Perhaps these are not cases of direct perception, but they're enough to undermine claim (1): for sense modalities other than hearing, sounds *are* perceivable, even if not *directly*.

In light of these reflections, (1) should be weakened as follows:

> (1′) Sound is unique in that it cannot be *directly* seen, tasted, smelled, or felt, but only heard. That is, sound is the proper object of *direct* hearing.

This is more likely to be true.[5] In any case, so much for claim (1). The rest of this paper targets claim (2).

§2. *Berkeley v. Heidegger*

The following exchange occurs early in the first of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues*:

> PHILONOUS. This point then is agreed between us, that *sensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by sense*. You will farther inform me, whether we immediately perceive by sight any thing beside light, and colours, and figures: or by hearing, any thing but sounds: by the palate, any thing beside tastes: by the smell, beside odours: or by the touch, more than tangible qualities.

> HYLAS. We do not. (1992, 138)

In short, we immediately or directly perceive only sensible qualities, which, Philonous goes on to argue, exist only insofar as they are perceived. Such a view receives little support from contemporary philosophers. It is widely agreed that what we immediately perceive are not mind-dependent qualities, but mind-independent objects. In particular, what we immediately *see* and *touch* are supposed to be ordinary objects—or, at worst, parts of ordinary objects—such as horses and tomatoes.[6] This is not to deny that we see colours and shapes; it is to deny that we see the horse *by* or *in virtue of* seeing its color and shape.[7] Our visual experience of the horse is not "mediated" by the experience of sensible qualities such as color and shape. Similar considerations hold for touch.

Yet the priority accorded to ordinary objects in visual and tactile perception is usually not extended to the other sense-modalities. Focusing on the case of hearing, philosophers typically follow Berkeley in taking the only immediate objects of hearing to be sounds. And even if they reject the Berkeleyan view that sounds are mind-dependent qualities, it still follows that if we hear ordinary objects or events, we do so only in virtue of hearing the sounds that they make. In this respect, contemporary reflection on hearing retains a strong empiricist cast. Thus, the passage from Sorensen above; and here is Casey O'Callaghan:

> What do we hear? Sounds are, in the first instance, what we hear. They are the immediate objects of auditory experience in the following sense: whatever else we might hear, such as ordinary objects (bells, trumpets) and events (collisions, typing), we hear it in virtue of hearing a sound. (2009, 609; cf. 2008b, 318)[8]

Call this *the Berkeleyan view* of hearing. Despite its overwhelming popularity, there are (pace Sorensen) scattered examples of resistance. Consider Heidegger:

> We never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things…; rather we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-motored plane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door shut in the house and never hear acoustical sensations or even mere sounds. In order to hear a bare sound we have to listen away from things, divert our ear from them, i.e., listen abstractly. (1977, 151-2)

Heidegger seems to reject the idea that the experience of sound mediates between us and the ordinary objects and events that we hear. We do not hear things *in virtue of* hearing the sounds that they make; rather, we hear things *in* hearing their sounds. In this case, hearing sound is similar to seeing color. We do not see things *in virtue of* seeing their colors; rather, we see them *in* seeing their colors. The experience of the tomato's color does not mediate your visual experience of the tomato. Similarly, if we hear ordinary objects and events *in* hearing the sounds that they make, then hearing a sound involves an unmediated experience of its source. Call this *the Heideggerian view* of hearing.

Against the grain of contemporary thinking, the rest of this paper presents considerations in favor of the Heideggerian view. In particular, I argue that this view receives support from reflection on what auditory experience is like. This is important because, as we'll see, arguments for the Berkeleyan view typically appeal to such phenomenological considerations.

§3. Phenomenological Independence

While I can simply *see* horses, the Berkeleyan view holds that I can *hear* them only in virtue of hearing the sounds that they make. Why accept this? Well, it might seem woven into the very fabric of perceptual phenomenology. Colors

visually seem to be fused with their objects, but it is commonly supposed that nothing like this is true of sounds. Casey O'Callaghan writes:

> [S]ounds do not seem bound to ordinary objects in the way that their colors, shapes, and textures do…. Auditory experience presents sounds as independent from ordinary material things, in a way that visual and tactual features are not. (2008a, 804)

But in exactly what sense are sounds supposed to seem independent from ordinary material things? In another passage, O'Callaghan gives a better indication: "[A] sound seems like such a different sort of thing from a commonplace material object or occurrence" (2008b, 319). Apparently, the idea is not merely that sounds seem to be distinct from particular material things, but that they seem to be independent of—somehow *apart from*—the ordinary material world altogether. Following Strawson (1959, ch. 2), this same idea is endorsed by Matthew Nudds:

> [T]he idea that our experience of sounds is of things which are distinct from the world of material objects can seem compelling. All you have to do to confirm it is close your eyes and reflect on the character of your auditory experience. (2001, 210)[9]

This general view of auditory phenomenology can be summed up in the following principle:

> *Phenomenological Independence*:
> Hearing presents sounds as independent of ordinary material objects and events.

If Phenomenological Independence is true, then, in undergoing an auditory experience, it auditorily seems to me that I am hearing something independent of ordinary material objects and events. On the plausible assumption that auditory phenomenology is non-illusory, it follows that I can hear ordinary objects and events only indirectly, *in virtue of* hearing sounds. Consequently, if Phenomenological Independence is true, then reflection on the phenomenology

of perception provides support for the Berkeleyan view. However, I think that Phenomenological Independence is false. My argument for this is in two stages. First, I argue for a phenomenological principle that is in deep tension with Phenomenological Independence. Second, I argue against Phenomenological Independence directly.

§4. Phenomenological Intimacy

On perceiving something that you do not recognize, it is fitting to ask, "What is that?" Sid hears a sound and asks, "What is that?" Pia answers: "That's my neighbor breaking bottles." Sid and Pia both refer demonstratively to whatever is making the noise; and Pia's claim is true just in case it is, in fact, her neighbor breaking bottles.

Adherents of the Berkeleyan view will explain this as follows: Sid and Pia refer to the sound source by "deferred ostension." After all, the only immediate object of perception—and so, possible object of primitive demonstrative reference—is the sound. Michael Martin writes:

> In the case of audition, the primary objects of demonstrative identification are sounds, associated with phrases such as 'that barking' or 'that noise'. One may pick out the source of the sound via picking out the sound itself—we might then understand the demonstrative expression, 'that dog' as involving deferred ostension, perhaps as the descriptive phrase, 'the dog which is actually the source of this sound'. There is a clear contrast between the case of auditory perception of sounds and their sources with the case of colour or shape detection in the case of vision. We do not think of visual demonstrations of objects as proceeding via a demonstration, 'the object which possesses that colour'. (1997, 93; cf. Nudds 2001, 222; Campbell 1997, 65-6)

Martin suggests that auditory experience alone does not enable us to make primitive demonstrative reference to sound sources. Yet his support for this

seems to be that we typically *think* of purely auditory demonstrations of sound sources as instances of deferred ostension. But is this true?

Arguably, no. That's because we do not think of or experience sounds as mere signs of their sources.[10] When Pia enters the house and calls out, "Sid, I'm home!" Sid does not think of or experience this as a *sign* of Pia's presence; rather, it seems to him that he simply *hears Pia call*. In particular, it auditorily seems to Sid that he can make primitive demonstrative reference to Pia (and to her calling). Contrary to what Martin says, we do not typically think of purely auditory demonstrations of sound sources as instances of deferred ostension. This is because it auditorily seems that sound sources are available for primitive demonstrative reference, a point recently emphasized by O'Callaghan (2008, 319).

This view of auditory phenomenology can be summed up in the following principle:

> *Phenomenological Intimacy*:
> Hearing presents sound sources as available for primitive demonstrative reference.

Now, is Phenomenological Intimacy compatible with Phenomenological Independence? *Not* on the assumption that auditory phenomenology is *non-illusory*. Here's why: if auditory phenomenology is non-illusory, then Phenomenological Independence entails that sounds are *independent* of their sources and that we hear sound sources *in virtue of* hearing sounds; in this case, however, it is impossible to make primitive demonstrative reference to sound sources solely on the basis of auditory experience. Like a fire obscured by its own smoke, a sound source lies hidden behind the sound that it makes. Consequently, if auditory phenomenology is non-illusory, then it seems that

either Phenomenological Independence or Phenomenological Intimacy must be false.[11] In my view, this is sufficient to make Phenomenological Independence deeply unappealing. Nevertheless, adherents of the Berkeleyan view will probably choose instead to reject Phenomenological Intimacy. Fortunately, however, there are additional reasons to reject Phenomenological Independence. To these I now turn.

§5. Phenomenological Binding

Here's how I see it—or rather, *hear* it. Phenomenological Independence is false: sounds do not auditorily seem to be independent of ordinary objects and events. Rather, sounds auditorily seem to be fused with their sources just as much as colors visually seem to be fused with their bearers. That is:

> *Phenomenological Binding*:
> Hearing presents sounds as bound to, or fused with, their sources.

If auditory phenomenology is non-illusory, then Phenomenological Binding entails that, in hearing sounds, we hear their sources, which is the Heideggerian view of hearing.

Understanding how Phenomenological Binding could be true requires appreciating that, strictly speaking, objects do not make sounds—events do. The static bell is silent; striking it elicits sound. While you may say, "That's the bell," in identifying a sound source, such a claim is implicitly understood as elliptically picking out an event by picking out an object involved in it. The idea that only events can make sounds is part of our ordinary, untutored conception of sound, and ignoring it can lead to confusion. Thinking of the bell as what makes the sound easily leads to thinking of the sound as independent of its source, since,

after all, they have very different persistence conditions. On the other hand, if we think of sound sources as events, then we don't have this problem. When the event ends, the sound ceases. Moreover, as the sound changes, the event does, too. And in hearing the sound change, you don't experience this as a mere sign of a change in the event. You seem to experience the change in the event *in* experiencing the change in the sound; this is so even if you don't know in exactly what way the event has changed.

Phenomenological Binding is encouraged by a simple imaginative exercise. Imagine striking a bell. Now try to imaginatively subtract away the sound. This is just as difficult as picturing a tomato and trying to imaginatively subtract away its color. Sounds auditorily seem no less bound to the events that cause them than colors visually seem bound to their bearers. This seems to me a very strong phenomenological point in favor of Phenomenological Binding.[12]

Furthermore, Phenomenological Independence seems to have some seriously undesirable consequences. According to Phenomenological Independence, hearing presents sounds as independent of ordinary objects and events. What exactly would it be to hear sounds in this way? At one point, Nudds writes: "Sounds may appear to be, as Strawson says, correlated with the material world, but they do not appear to be part of it" (2001, 215). In this case, to hear sounds as Phenomenological Independence requires would be to hear sounds as only contingently related to their causes—as if they might not have been caused by material events at all. But this is incoherent. Sounds are not merely contingently caused by material events. To be caused by an appropriate sort of material event is part of what it is to be a sound. So, to hear sounds in the way that Phenomenological Independence requires would be to hear sounds as if

they weren't sounds at all, but something else entirely. Surely this is an undesirable result. In any case, it entails that auditory phenomenology is illusory: sounds are heard as if they were something other than they are. The appropriate response to this situation is to reject Phenomenological Independence and embrace Phenomenological Binding.

Why, then, have so many philosophers believed that Phenomenological Independence is true? I think that they have been misled by the relative epistemological poverty of hearing. It happens that we see things that we do not recognize, but it is far more common that we do not know exactly what we hear. You turn around on hearing a sound behind you to know better what you have heard. The sheer difficulty of identifying many events by their sounds is what leads us to investigate by other means. And it is easy to understand how this might lead us to think of hearing as presenting sounds as separate from their sources: after all, it seems that I know all about the sound, but I know so little about its source![13]

Finally, two concluding remarks.

First, unlike Phenomenological Independence, Phenomenological Binding is a natural corollary of Phenomenological Intimacy. If sounds are bound up with their sources, it is easy to understand how hearing sounds could put us in a position to make primitive demonstrative reference to the events that produce them. So, we can comfortably accept Phenomenological Intimacy and Phenomenological Binding without being forced to argue that auditory phenomenology is illusory.

Second, if Phenomenological Independence is false, and hearing presents sounds as bound up with their sources just as much as vision presents colors as

bound up with their bearers, then, contra Strawson, it is not true that even purely auditory experience is non-spatial. Auditory experience is spatial because in hearing sounds we seem to hear ordinary events, which have spatial properties essentially.

In sum, I have argued that reflection on the phenomenology of auditory experience provides support for what I have been calling the Heideggerian view of hearing: we hear sound sources directly, *in* hearing the sounds that they make—not, à la Berkeley, merely *in virtue of* hearing those sounds.

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[1] Sorensen goes on to argue that "there is a single exception" to this view: "We hear silence, which is the absence of sound." So, more precisely, according to Sorensen, the immediate objects of hearing are sonic objects (sounds and silences), and when we hear an ordinary object, we do so in virtue of hearing a sonic one.

[2] Note that, even if only sound can be directly heard, it is still possible to hear sounds indirectly—as in, say, hearing a recording or a radio transmission rather than being present at the live performance.

[3] Three points in passing:

First, it is important that claims (1) and (2) are mutually independent: that sound can only be heard—(1)—does not impose any restrictions on what else can be heard, whether directly or indirectly; and that only sound can be directly heard—(2)—does not exclude the possibility that sound is perceptually accessible by other means. Therefore, claims (1) and (2) require independent criticism.

Second, since (1) and (2) are mutually independent, it is unclear exactly what Sorensen has in mind in speaking of "the principle" on which "all subsequent commentators agree."

Lastly, since facts about grammar don't entail substantive metaphysical or epistemological theses, Warnock's claim that 'sound' is the "tautological accusative" of the verb 'hear' at best *suggests* (2)—that only sound can be directly heard. By contrast, his claim doesn't even *suggest* (1)—that sound can only be heard—since 'sound' might yet go perfectly well with perception verbs other than 'hear'.

[4] Further imagine someone whose visual, tactile, and auditory systems regularly fail. We might devise for her a prosthetic that "translates" an auditory stimulus into a gustatory (and/or olfactory) stimulus in a manner that enables simple communication. She could then literally be said to taste (and/or smell) sounds (but perhaps not directly?).

[5] Note that (1′) remains independent of (2). Claim (1′)—that sound can be directly perceived only by hearing—does not impose any restrictions on what else can be directly heard; and claim (2)—that only sound can be directly heard—does not exclude the possibility that sound is directly perceivable by other means.

[6] For the purposes of this essay, I will ignore the question of whether we should take the immediate objects of visual perception to be full-blown objects (horses, etc.) or merely parts of objects (horse-surfaces, etc.). For the sake of simplicity, I will write as if the issue has been decided in favor of full-blown objects. (For considerations in favor of this view, see Leddington (2009); for arguments against it, see Bermùdez (2000).)

[7] On this use of the phrase 'in virtue of', see Jackson (1977, 15-20) and Bermùdez (2000, 356-7).

[8] Also see, for instance, Tye (2009, 209 n23).

[9] Nudds goes on to argue that the unworldly appearance of sound is explained by the non-spatial character of purely auditory experience, which is discussed in detail in Strawson (1959, ch. 2).

[10] On the relationship between deferred ostension and relations of signification, consider the following. Jonas points toward a thick cloud of smoke rising over distant treetops and says, "That's a big fire!" and so refers demonstratively to the fire. But of course Jonas isn't pointing at the fire, he's pointing at the smoke. He can't point at the fire, since it's not in view (though he can point toward it). His demonstrative reference to the fire is a case of deferred ostension: it proceeds by means of a descriptive phrase such as 'the fire that is the source of that smoke.' His ability to refer to the fire, and our ability to understand him as doing so, is essentially underwritten by knowledge of the causal relationship between fire and smoke. In virtue of this knowledge, the smoke is experienced as a sign of the fire. The question is: is this model plausibly applied to auditory experience? I think the answer is clearly *no*.

[11] O'Callaghan would dispute this. Based on a discussion by José Luis Bermúdez (2000), O'Callaghan has, in effect, argued that Phenomenological Independence and Phenomenological Intimacy are jointly compatible with the assumption that auditory phenomenology is non-illusory (see O'Callaghan 2008, fn. 9). However, O'Callaghan's application of Bermúdez's discussion to the case of audition fails. Here's the problem. Bermúdez argues that it does not follow from the fact that *S* experiences *A* in virtue of experiencing *B* (where $A \neq B$) that such an experience fails to make A available for primitive demonstrative reference. But everything depends on the relationship between *A* and *B*. Bermúdez plausibly claims that, if *B* is a *mereological part* of *A*, then the experience of *B could* enable primitive demonstrative reference to *A*. But this doesn't help us in the current case, since, if Phenomenological Independence is true and auditory phenomenology is non-illusory, then sounds are *independent*—and so *not* mereological parts—of sound sources. Thus, pace O'Callaghan, Bermúdez's point simply doesn't apply here.

[12] This is consistent with the idea that we can think of a sound without thinking of it as having any particular cause. After all, we can think of a color without thinking of it as having any particular bearer. For, just as qualitatively the same color may be borne by very different objects, qualitatively the same sound may be caused by very different events.

[13] Note that the analogy with color experience holds here, too. Imagine trying to identify objects solely on the basis of their colors, without much, if any, information about their shapes or locations. The difficulty is obvious. As in the case of hearing, you would often wish to employ other means, especially touch, and, if this sort of thing occurred often enough, you might be led to think of vision as presenting colors as separate from their bearers; but this, of course, would be a mistake.