**PHL340 Handout 6: Non-Visual Perception**

## §1 Looking Beyond Vision

Philosophers of perception usually focus on vision, and frequently assume that what they say about visual experience applies (in a suitably modified form) to non-visual experience.

> Non-visual perceptual modalities include taste, olfaction, touch, and audition. What do we taste? Flavours. What do we smell? Uh… smells. What do we touch? Surfaces. And what do we hear? Sounds.

We've seen philosophers make claims about the nature of perception on the basis of introspective reflection upon the phenomenal character of visual experience. In particular, most accept *Transparency*: visual experience seems to provide direct perceptual awareness of (presumably mind-independent) ordinary objects and their visible properties.

> Representationalists and direct realists argue that it is a virtue of their respective accounts of visual experience that they accommodate (and explain) *Transparency*.
>
> > Recall: *Representationalism* holds that the phenomenal character of visual experience is exhausted by the representational content of experience, where this representational content standardly includes visible properties (and perhaps also the perceived objects). *Direct realism* holds that the phenomenal character of veridical visual experience consists in the perceived objects, their properties, and a subject's perspective on these entities.
>
> These positions lose some of their attraction if we abandon *Transparency*. Similarly, the unfashionable indirect realist alternative would gain traction if it were able to avoid the need to accommodate *Transparency*.
>
> > Indirect realists believe that we are indirectly perceptually aware of (presumably mind-independent) ordinary objects and their properties in virtue of being directly aware of some (presumably mind-dependent) entity.

*Transparency* looks much less plausible when adapted to certain non-visual sensory modalities.

> When I'm eating a masala dosa, or a raspberry torte, what I taste are the *flavours* of these foods. Yet some argue that I do not taste the *objects* themselves; I instead taste the *substances* in my mouth.
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> One view of touch says that we perceive objects in virtue of perceiving surfaces. So touch provides direct awareness of surfaces, and only indirectly awareness of objects.
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> > *Question:* what about olfaction (we'll look at audition in a moment)?

As O'Callaghan notes (cf. p. 114), there are several ways we might approach non-visual perception. Most interesting is the possibility that attention to non-visual perception will cause us to revise or abandon positions motivated by reflection upon visual experience. As we'll see, he defends just such a revisionary stance with respect to auditory experience.

**§2 Are Sounds Private?**

Casey O'Callaghan is an indirect realist about auditory experience: he argues on phenomenological grounds that we are indirectly aware of ordinary objects in virtue of being directly aware of sounds.

> *Hard Question*: should the adoption of indirect realism with respect to auditory experience put pressure on us to adopt indirect realism with respect to visual experience?

Why aren't sounds ordinary objects? To answer this question we require a rough characterization of what it is for something to be an ordinary (or 'material') object. We need to do some *metaphysics*.

> An account of ordinary objects must distinguish them from other sorts of things (e.g. properties, events, parts of ordinary objects, etc.).
>
> > Here is O'Callaghan on ordinary objects: 'Roughly, they're something very much like medium-sized, three dimensional, extended, bounded, cohesive, persisting items.' (p. 145)
> >
> > > *Less Technical Version*: Ordinary objects fill space (unlike properties); possess a size somewhere between tiny particles and gigantic stars and galaxies; have proper boundaries (unlike liquids); have parts that cohere (unlike a collection of marbles); and are both wholly present at every moment of their existence and survive the addition or loss of a property (unlike events or processes, which always have some of their parts at different times).

Since sounds lack many, if not all, of the features that distinguish ordinary objects, it seems safe to conclude that they are not ordinary objects.

> *Question*: do you agree with how O'Callaghan distinguishes the class of ordinary objects? Are his conditions on ordinary-object-hood all necessary (or correct)?

O'Callaghan may be an indirect realist about auditory experience, but he wishes to *resist* commitment to the view that sounds are private. He claims that the temptation for indirect realists to think of sounds as private comes from an antecedent commitment to the view that auditory experience is aspatial:

> 'Given [the aspatiality of auditory experience], audition's immediate objects are not experienced auditorily as located in the space surrounding one's body. If sounds do not auditorily appear to inhabit the same space as material things (in the world beyond the ears), this lends support to the intuition that they are private, like headaches, rather than public. You might wonder where else they could seem to be if not "out there." Or you might think seeming to be "out there"—or public—just is seeming to be located in extra-bodily space. Or you might think sounds fail to meet what the Kantian tradition regards as the spatial requirement on objective experience. The line of thought thus concludes that it is intuitive, on phenomenological grounds, to understand sounds as private features, by which one perceives or which one associates with material objects.' [p. 147]

Many philosophers have held that auditory experience is not spatial. For instance, Strawson

in Ch. 2 of *Individuals* claims that someone stuck with purely auditory experience would lack awareness of spatial relations. Strawson uses this claim to argue that this 'purely auditory' subject would be unable to conceive of a mind-independent world; she would not have grounds upon which to distinguish *what* she hears from her auditory *experience*.

O'Callaghan argues that sceptics about the spatiality of auditory experience – philosophers like Strawson – mistake the *inpoverished* spatial perception of audition for an *absence* of spatial perception (cf. pp. 148-149).

> He alludes to empirical evidence that suggests auditory experience carries information about direction and distance, as well as to phenomenological contrast arguments that suggest we hear sounds as being outside of us (recall Siegel's appeal to contrasting experiences when she deploys her phenomenal contrast method).
>
> Of most interest is what O'Callaghan says when trying to diagnose the attraction of scepticism about the spatiality of auditory experience.
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> > He notes that we do not experience sounds as having a complex internal spatial structure. In contrast, we visually experience ordinary objects as spatially complex: objects are unities composed of spatially extended parts, each of which occupies its own region of space.

Aside from his argument against sceptics of spatial experience, O'Callaghan gestures at a series of reasons we ought to treat sounds as <u>public</u> rather than private:

> 'We plug our ears to cease hearing sounds we regard to persist; sounds exhibit constancy for loudness, timbre, and pitch across changes to perspective and listening conditions; sounds are shared topics of conversation, and commonly are a public nuisance. Sounds, unlike headaches, can be hallucinated or misperceived.' (p. 149)

*Question*: do you find these considerations at all persuasive?

> <u>Some reasons to be sceptical</u>: (1) we might plug our ears in order to interrupt the mechanism responsible for causing private sounds; (2) the privacy of sounds need not entail that we have infallible access to them, so the possibility of hallucination and misperception is no guarantee that sounds are public.
>
> > O'Callaghan's appeals to communication and to perceptual constancy—the perceptual system's successful identification of perceived property instances despite discernable differences between them (e.g. due to lighting conditions)—raise delicate issues. For instance, some are sceptical of our ability to communicate about anything private (e.g. private sensations).

**§3 Are Sounds Properties or Individuals?**

If sounds are not ordinary objects, they must belong to some other metaphysical category. We have two broad options: either sounds are <u>properties</u> (repeatable entities instantiated by other entities) or they are <u>individuals</u> (non-repeatable entities that instantiate properties and

are not themselves instantiated by other things). O'Callaghan argues that not only are sounds individuals, but they are event-like individuals.

O'Callaghan offers three considerations that count in favour of treating properties as individuals (cf. p. 151):

1. Sounds instantiate properties such as timbre, pitch, and loudness.
2. We hear multiple sounds simultaneously: a nearby clock, a distant roar, etc.
3. A version of the 'Many Properties Problem' arises for sounds:

> '[H]earing a loud, low-pitched sound on the left and a soft, high-pitched sound on the right differs from hearing a loud, high-pitched sound on the left and a soft, low-pitched sound on the right. This motivates the introduction of audible individuals, in addition to audible attributes, to capture the respect in which the latter are bound to or qualify a single perceptible item.' (p. 151).

Note: 1 does not yet distinguish sounds from properties. And just as we might see different property instances within a single visual scene, if sounds were properties they could be experienced simultaneously. So 1 and 2 provide little real motivation for treating sounds as individuals; O'Callaghan must rely upon 3 to make his case.

> See pp. 151-152 for his argument for the view that sounds are event-like. It relies upon claims about how sounds, as opposed to objects, occupy time.

He eventually argues that just as ordinary objects possess a part-whole structure, where the parts both occupy and are arranged within space, sounds have a part-whole structure that relies upon temporal relations rather than spatial relations. See pp. 152-153.

> If he is right, then perceptual experience puts us in perceptual contact with a very diverse range of 'objects'; a much more diverse class than many have long assumed.

**§4 Indirect Auditory Awareness of Objects**

In §5 of his paper, O'Callaghan turns to the problem of explaining how direct auditory awareness of sounds can provide indirect auditory awareness of ordinary objects.

He first argues that we must have some auditory awareness of ordinary objects. The argument appeals to need for ordinary objects to serve as the basis for irreducibly multimodal perceptual experiences. These are experiences that attribute properties detected by different sensory organs (say visual and auditory receptions) to a single object, yet do so without first individually attributing these properties.

> Here is O'Callaghan stating the argument: 'sometimes you perceptually experience the thing you hear as being the very same thing you see. Since you don't see sounds, there must be something else you hear and also see. There's something common, apart from a sound, that you auditorily and visually experience—and in such a way that the identity is experientially evident. That something might be a material object.' (p. 155)

He finally argues that we have indirect auditory awareness of ordinary objects in virtue of these objects being constituent parts of event-like sounds. Analogously: we can be visually aware of a largely hidden object in virtue of seeing one of its visible parts.