Seeing Absence

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1. Absence Experience as Perceptual

1.1 The Belief-based View Rejected

Dharmakīrti: what an experience of the absence of an object consists in is an inference to a belief in the object's absence based on the failure to perceive the object in circumstances where the conditions for its perceptibility (*pakṣatva*) are met (*Nyāya-bindu* 43), so that there is a counterfactual enthymematic major premise, that were the object to be present you would perceive it.

Objections: (1), forming a judgement takes time and conscious effort whereas experiences of absence typically feel instantaneous and effortless (Farennikova 2013, 435, Martin and Dokic 2013, 118). (2), experiences of absence are often insensitive to belief: even if one came to form a belief that the object is present, the experience of absence may persist **[Fig. 1]**

Nyāya: Nyāya Realism is true even of absence experience, thereby committing themselves to a seventh metaphysical category, that of absences, as well as to a proprietary perceptual relation acquainting observers with its members.

[TEXT 1] "In fact, positing the sensory perception of absence is correct because there are experiences such as are reported as "I observed the absence of the water-jug on the ground", which are demonstrably correlated with sensory perception" (*vastuto bhūtale ghaṭo nāstīti mayā dṛṣṭam ity anubhavād indriyasyānanyathāsiddhānvaya-vyatireka-vaśāc cendriya-jan yaṃ pratyakṣam evābhāvasya yuktam*; Mahādeva Puṇatāmakara 1930, 159).

Objections: (1) absences are not the right sorts of thing to serve as causes in the causal history of a perceptual experience (Gow 2021, 169-70). (2) there is no relation of conscious perceptual acquaintance holding between observers and absences.

1.2 Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya's Theory of Absence Experience

Three distinctive and original claims.

First, there are two kinds of absence experience: (i) seeing in the room the absence of a book (absential seeing-in), **and** (ii) a field looks bare (absential looks).

Second, both kinds of absence experience are genuinely perceptual, and describes the nature of the perceptual experience involved as "imaginative perception" or "aesthetic perception".

Third, absence experience of either kind can undergo a transformation into non-perceptual cognitive states, which Bhattacharyya calls states of "conscious non-perception". A "transformation in attending" (Arvidson 2006, 56–85), **or** a "dogmatic" claim about the justification of judgements about absence:"the dogmatist about perceptual justification says that when it perceptually seems to you as if *p* is the case, you have a kind of justification for believing *p* that does not presuppose or rest on your justification for anything else, which could be cited in an argument for *p*. To have this justification for believing *p*, you need only have an experience that represents *p* as being the case" (Pryor 2000, 519).

2 Mental Imagery and Negative Attention

"An object may be […] directly known to be now absent, to be 'present as absent' in this sense—a paradoxical phrase to be justified presently." (Bhattacharyya 1930, §68).

The role of images

A target for my visual search is provided by a mental image of the missing book.

A perceptual experience of the book being absent "is with the conscious imagination of the book as found being distinct from it" (1930, §72), adding that "one may come to imagine the room as with the [book] and then realise [its] absence in reference to this imagined content." (1930, §76).

E.g. René Magritte's *Man with Newspaper* (1928; Tate). **[Fig. 2]**

An experience of absence, then, is one in which the field of consciousness is structured into figure and ground, and where mental imagery supplies an image of the absent object.
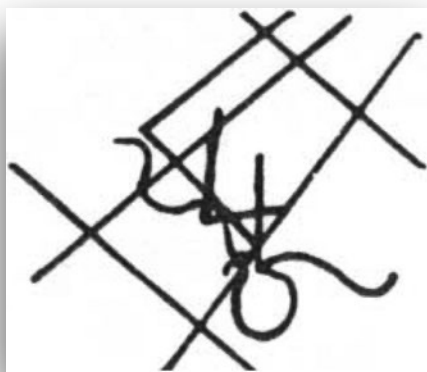
2.1 Negative attention

[TEXT 2] "We know the absence of an object, say of a book on the table by a faculty which is neither perception nor inference. It is not perception, for the absence gives no sensation; and it cannot be inference, for inference must be based on perception. The faculty however being there, it may be helped out by the perception or inference. […] The non-existence of a book on the table is an objective fact known by negative attention, defined by relation to the facts obtained by positive attention." ([1914, §9])

Presence-as-absent is not a "gestalt-contexture"

" A unitary whole of varying degrees of richness in detail, which, by virtue of its intrinsic articulation and structure, possesses coherence and consolidation and, thus, detaches itself as an organized and closed unit from the surrounding field" (Gurwitsch 2010, 139). **[Fig. 3]**

Figure 3: Gestalt-coherence of the figure "4"

An absence lacks any such structure; it is presented as lacking in spatial contours or location: negative attention to absence is "the consciousness of presentness without space-position" (1930, §79). As Sartre put it, Pierre's absence "haunts" the cafe and is not localised in any particular place within the cafe (1956, 10).

So an absence is not a figure against a background. It is a *vacancy* in the figure-position: although my experience is structured so as to have the book as figure and the room as ground, the book is not there.

"[Sometimes the] theme is evanescent, as in Sartre's famous example of looking for Pierre in the café, and he is not there. Everywhere in the café what is attended to is Pierre presented as absent against the contextual background of the cafe. It is like searching for the hidden weeds amongst a thick lawn cover. The content in thematic attention is not nothing, it is something. And as soon as the weed presents itself as theme, the previous theme of weed *presented as absent*, an evanescent flickering of thematic content, is replaced by the weed as present" (Arvidson 2006, 72).

Attention as Window not Spotlight

"The window analogy, on the other hand, implies that irrelevant features are actively excluded or suppressed, perhaps because, without attention, random conjunctions of the features present are unconsciously formed" (Treisman 2003, 102). Again, "selection is controlled extrinsically by a spatial aperture or 'window' that can be narrowly focused or more widely opened…" (Treisman 1990, 460–1).

Figure 4: Visual Conjunction Search: Search for 'Blue Horizontal'
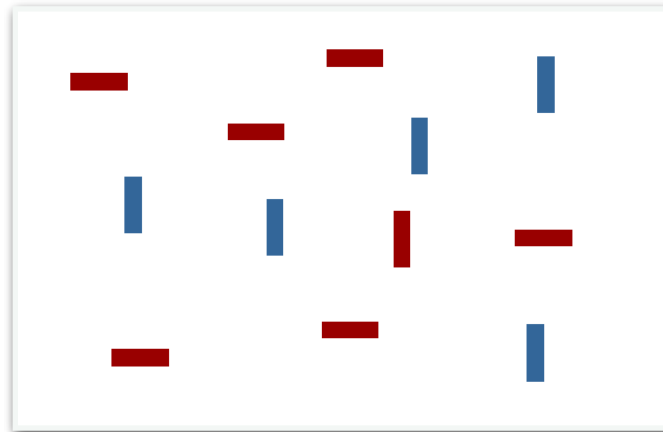
"…this Pierre in relation to whom the situation is defined is precisely Pierre *absent*" (Sartre [1940] 2004: 187) - but Sartre conflates the distinction between the idea of an absence as itself the figure and the different idea of an emptiness in the figure-position.

Role of mental imagery as "guiding idea"

"To be conscious of a spatial object as perceived is to be conscious of a percept and to be conscious of it as unperceived is to be conscious of an image" (Bhattacharyya, "Objective Interpretation of Percept and Image," 1936b, §1; 1958, 263).

"We may look upon a guiding idea as a partial filter that lets through those 'noticings' that are germane to the search, and that at the same time keeps down the number of extraneous 'noticings' […but…] this guiding idea cannot itself be conceived of as the object of attention during the search. Were it to become so, instead of prosecuting the search the attender would at best be engaged in planning a search, and at worst he would be merely distracted by an idea." (Evans 1970, 109).

3. The Phenomenology of Incongruence and Surprise

"Visual experience of O's absence consists in an object-level mismatch between O's template generated by visual working memory and a percept of the observed stimulus" (Farennikova 2013, 444).

"You are certain that you had brought your keys into the house, you look and look, but the keys are nowhere to be found. Here is the breakdown of the process. Prior to searching, you generate a visual template of the keys in your working memory. […] Next, you project this template and match it against the places where you typically leave your keys […where…] in projection, you attend to the template of your keys for the purpose of comparing it with the world. An experience of absence of your keys will involve a mismatch between their template and the places viewed during search." (Farennikova 2013, 441).

Visual templates vs. mental images:

"One might be tempted to think of visual templates as images or visualizations of the absent object. But this way to conceptualize templates may invite confusion. 'Images' often refer to mental pictures, consciously or intentionally generated by the subject. Although perception of absence often uses templates of that sort (e.g., an image of your laptop may flash before your eyes when you discover its absence), it does not have to. Templates of objects may be produced at the subpersonal level, projected involuntarity, and lack the vivacity of conscious imagery." (2013, 442-3).

Visual templates need not be conceptual: "While time constraints, memory flaws, or lack of the relevant conceptual apparatus may prevent us from appropriately *cognizing* an absence, they don't have to prevent us from *experiencing* one" (Farennikova 2013, 450).

What is it like to experience absence?

"The phenomenology of absence," Farennikova writes, "is the experience of incongruity" (Farennikova 2013, 445).

Objection 1: feelings of incongruity are metacognitive: "We do not see absences, but we may feel surprised when there is an absence of seeing", a feeling whose function is "to help the subject to avoid or reduce epistemic inconsistency" (Martin and Dokic 2013, 123-4).

Objection 2: Neither surprise nor incongruence is essential to the phenomenology of absence experience: "The gap is not merely perceived as an empty space between two objects, i.e. the teeth that mark the boundaries of the gap. Rather, it is tactually perceived as a location at which a tooth is now *missing*. Something once experienced as present within your mouth is now experienced as lacking" (Cavendon-Taylor 2017, 355). "The phenomenology of surprise is not central to any analysis of absence perception" (2017, 362).

Objection 3: expected absence: "Tourists traveling in the desert will expect to see no trees. An observer will expect the sun to disappear behind the ocean line" (Farennikova 2013, 446). This is a problem for Farennikova: "if the model can explain perceptual experiences of expected absences, as it is advertised to, then Farennikova is wrong about incongruity constituting the phenomenology of absence perception" (Cavendon-Taylor 2017, 361).

4. Absential looks

"… instead of the expected signature at the end of a letter you see blank white paper: you say, 'I saw that there was no name.' This reports an experience of absence, which is not to be confused with affective experiences like surprise which frequently attend it. The experience happened as you saw, and registered the presence of, a pure expanse of white. […] You say: 'In seeing the white, I saw there was no signature,' thereby timing the experience and internally linking it to the seeing of white. What can be the nature of this link? What sort of 'in seeing' is this? […I submit that…] the experience of seeing the absence of X is […] a cognitive experience such that we experience the visual object *as* a presence endowed with a negative property. For example, we see the pure expanse of white *as* an unsigned-upon white expanse, and (so to say) bereft in a certain regard." (O'Shaugnessy 2002, 329–30).

[TEXT 3] "A field, for example, was observed in the past with a tree standing on it, which might or might not have been particularly noticed at the time. The observer comes to the place when the tree has been removed and finds a new bare look about the place. He may not know that it is the absence of the tree that makes the difference but he notices the difference, bareness or absence.[…] [T]he absence of the tree is known as a character of

the locus, the perceived field where the tree stood. The tree may not be definitely remembered but if remembered it is recognised to be the specification of the absence that continues to be known, the place not ceasing to wear the bare look because of the definite memory. As the place is perceived, absence as a character of the place may also be claimed to be perceived. There is, however, a distinction between the sense in which absence is a character and that in which a quality like colour is a character of the place. The place in being perceived with the bareness or absence is, if not perceived, then at least imagined as what need not have the character, being presented as with a new look or, in other words, as distinct from what it might be. But to perceive the place with a colour is not necessarily to imagine that it might be without it. The perceived locus of absence being imagined in the very perception of it as without the absence, the absence is only a floating adjective that unlike colour is felt to be dissociated from the locus….The perception [of the absence] may be called aesthetic or imaginative perception to distinguish it from ordinary perception." (Bhattacharyya 1930, §§70-1)

Looks and solicitations.

"'affordance', a term introduced by J. J. Gibson, is used "to describe objective features of the world in terms of their meaning to the creatures that use them. Thus a hole *affords* hiding to a rabbit but not to an elephant. To us floors afford walking on, apples afford eating, etc." Dreyfus notes that the Gestaltists were "unhappy with the term 'affordance'. They were interested not in our perception of objective features of the world but in how such features are related to the needs and interests of perceivers. So they introduced the term *solicitations*. For Gibson an apple *affords* eating, i.e. is edible, whether anyone is hungry or not, but the Gestaltists add that only when one is hungry does an apple *solicit* eating, i.e. look delicious" (Dreyfus 2013, 37 n.12).

5. Two Perceptual Projects Thesis

Wollheim: there are two sorts of perceptual project, two projects for which our perceptual capacities might be enlisted (Wollheim1980, 145–8).
- **Seeing face-to-face**: One project is to satisfy our "visual interest or curiosity about an object present to the senses" (1980, 148).
- **Seeing-in**: Another project is "to have perceptual experiences of things that are not present to the senses: that is to say, both of things that are absent and also of things that are non-existent" (1980, 145). This involves "the cultivation of a special kind of visual experience, which fastens upon certain objects in the environment for its furtherance" (149), which is to say "visions of things not present now come about through looking at things present" (1980, 145). A mode of perceptual experience unique to the experience of pictures and other representational works of art.

A better way to formulate the fundamental distinction is as between the role of perception in the presentation of things as present, and the role of perception in the presentation of things as absent.

Why does Bhattacharyya describe experiences of absence as "aesthetic perceptions"? An analogy between the experience of absence and picture perception:

(1) pictorial experiences are "perceptual experiences of things that are not present to the senses: that is to say, both of things that are absent and also of things that are non-existent" (Wollheim 1980, 145).

(2) in both cases the thing that is absent might be some particular thing or simply a thing of a certain kind.

"Told of a painting that it represents, say, a young woman, we might ask, Which young woman? Now for some pictures like the Ingres portrait, there is an answer to this question even if the actual person we ask turns out not to know it. In such cases the picture represents a particular object. However for other pictures such as the genre picture by Manet, there is no answer to the question, and asking the question shows only that we have misunderstood what we have been told. In such cases, the painting represents merely an object or an event of a particular kind." (Wollheim 1987, 69).

This distinction does not apply in the case of seeing face to face: "If I claim to see a young woman face-to-face, I cannot, when asked, Which young woman?, beg off and say that the question doesn't apply and that to ask it only betrays a misunderstanding of what I have said" (1987, 71).

A similar distinction applies in the case of perceptual experience of what's absent: the absence I report myself to see in a room might be that of a particular individual or it might be of any object of a particular kind. The Nyāya philosophers encode this point in their distinction between specific and generic absences (*viśeṣābhāva* and *sāmānyābhāva*).

5.1 Aniconic representation

Fig. 5 The Empty Throne, Kanaganahalli, 1st-3rd c.CE

The sculpture solicits the viewer to imagine the Buddha by experiencing the Buddha's absence.

Conclusion: I agree with Wollheim in the thesis that there are two perceptual projects. But it is better to draw the distinction in terms of perception of presence and perception of absence, between *the presentation of what is present* and *the presentation of what is absent*.

Bibliography

Please note that Hilla Wait has created an ORLO readings list wherein all the readings for this lecture series can be accessed. The link is (http://readinglists.bodleian.ox.ac.uk and enter "Seeing in Sanskrit").

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