

Comments on Jason Leddington, “What We Hear”
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Jason argues against two claims about sounds and hearing (I’ll treat *to hear* as *to auditorily experience*). The first is that sounds are proper objects of hearing—they’re inaccessible to other senses. The second is that the only things we seem to hear directly are sounds. Jason’s main target is the second claim.

Jason’s case against the second claim turns on arguing against *Phenomenological Independence*, the claim that auditory experiences present sounds as *independent* from ordinary material objects and happenings. Jason quotes Matt Nudds and me each supporting *PI*, such as in: “Auditory experience presents sounds as independent from ordinary material things, in a way that visual and tactual features are not” (O’C 2008).

According to the common thought that sounds are caused by and are heard as caused by material objects and happenings, *PI* is plausible. However, I agree with Jason that if we think of sounds as entities that are wholly distinct from and caused by their sources, it is difficult philosophical work to explain how we hear sound sources by or in virtue of hearing sounds. A causal relation can be a barrier to perceptual awareness—we don’t normally think of perceptual experiences as of effects grounding perceptual awareness as of causes. (It’s worth noting that we thus owe an explanation for why television and radio but not ordinary hearing are exceptions). And it is not clear deferred ostension is the right model for hearing sources. Still, most of us would like to allow that auditory experiences involve being aware as of the sources of sounds.

Jason argues against *PI* on phenomenological grounds and argues that we do not hear ordinary material things or sound sources indirectly by or in virtue of hearing the sounds they make. Instead, he advocates the *Heideggerian view*, according to which one hears sources *in* hearing their sounds and “hearing a sound involves an unmediated experience of its source.” Jason says that auditory experience presents sound sources as being available for demonstrative reference and that this tells against *PI*. It also supports *Phenomenological Binding*, the claim that auditory experience presents sounds as *bound to* their sources.

My earlier work on sounds and hearing suggests a stronger version of the claim that sounds are audibly independent from their sources than I now accept. In fact, I have a great deal of sympathy for Jason’s case. At a certain grain, I agree with his main points, and I think he is right to attack my earlier formulation.

In what follows, I want to explore *Phenomenological Independence* and *Phenomenological Binding* in just a little more detail. My goal is to see if I can recognize Jason’s insights while saving what’s plausible about *Phenomenological Independence* and capturing a version of *Phenomenological Binding*.

There are a number of senses in which we can say that one thing is independent from another, just as there are a number of senses in which we can say that one thing is

dependent upon another. Jason suggests (p 5) that when we think of sounds as being independent from ordinary material things, we think of them as being *distinct*, which he glosses as “somehow *apart from*”. Distinctness certainly connotes physical separateness, but it also seems fair to say that two things are distinct if they differ, are not identical, or are distinguishable. In his paper, Jason does not object to the claim that sounds are not identical with ordinary material objects or happenings. So, if we can hear sounds, and if we can hear sound sources, and if we can hear sounds as non-identical with sound sources, then this grounds a relatively uncontroversial form of *PI*.

One objection to this is that non-identity doesn’t suffice for *independence* because there might be non-identical things that nonetheless depend upon each other in some way or another. For instance, one thing can depend causally upon another. Or, one thing can depend for its present existence upon another. In each case, non-identical things are not independent from each other. If a sound is heard as depending causally upon a source, however, the corresponding version of *PI* fails though the sound needn’t be heard as bound to its source. So, I suspect Jason has in mind something stronger for *PI* —perhaps the claim that sounds are heard as not being dependent for their present existence upon ordinary material things; or that sounds are heard as autonomous from their sources.

Are sounds heard as being dependent for their present existence upon their sources? Some evidence suggests that sounds are available for demonstrative reference and attention in ways that do not involve demonstrative reference or attention to their sources. Scruton’s “acousmatic experience” is one example of an attempt to show that this is possible. We can listen or attend to musical sounds in a way that doesn’t obviously involve attention to their sources as such. In such listening, sounds aren’t clearly auditorily experienced as bound to their sources. That this isn’t the normal listening mode doesn’t show it’s impossible. This suggests that sounds are capable of being heard independently from their sources in certain forms of listening; it therefore suggests we are sometimes capable of hearing sounds in a way that presents them as independent from their sources.

That this is a possible listening mode doesn’t mean it’s the usual listening mode. It is plausible to think that in run-of-the-mill hearing, humans auditorily experience both sounds and sources, and also experience sounds as somehow related to their sources (though not by identity). So I agree with Jason that it’s plausible that we do not hear sounds as being wholly distinct from or as entirely independent from their sources. So, ordinary embedded hearing does not involve auditorily experiencing sounds as autonomous with respect to their apparent sources. I even agree with Jason that *PB* is plausible and that we hear sounds “as bound to, or fused with, their sources”. *PB* captures the intimacy with which we experience sounds to be related to their sources.

However, I still don’t want to push the analogy between colors and sounds as far as Jason does. And here I think that it is helpful to distinguish two senses of “bound”. First, properties are perceptually experienced as belonging to or as bound to their bearers. One sees the redness as qualifying or spread out across the surface of an object. One

feels the texture as being an attribute of the surface. One tastes the flavor as belonging to or being instantiated by the apricot. But I want to resist saying sounds are heard as properties or qualities of ordinary material objects or happenings in the way that other straightforwardly sensible qualities are perceptually experienced as belonging to sensible individuals. Instead, I want to argue that we hear sounds themselves as audible individuals to which audible qualities such as pitch, timbre, and loudness belong. Such audible individuals persist through time and survive change, and since sounds seem to require time to unfold or to occur, the manner in which they audibly appear to persist differs from that of ordinary visible objects. So, I want resist the claim that sounds are heard as bound to sound sources in the first sense—the sense in which sensible properties are perceptually experienced as being bound to the sensible individuals that are their bearers (or, alternatively, the sense in which sensible property instances are bound to each other).

But there's another way in which non-identical things can be bound or fused. The parts of an object are bound or fused and comprise a single compound object. Moreover, when you see a complex object, such a table or a chair, its distinct perceptible parts—the legs, the seat, the top...—are experienced as being fused or bound together into a single perceptible whole. When you see the facing surface of a table, you visually experience it to belong to or to be bound or fused to a larger object, some of whose parts are hidden from view.

How could this apply to the case of hearing sounds and sources? Jason mentions a promising account in passing in footnote 11. Sounds are heard as bound to or fused with their sources in the sense that sounds are heard as being mereological parts of complex environmental events that in fact involve sounds. So, for instance, there is the event of an automobile collision. When that event occurs in a surrounding elastic medium, there is an occurrence of a broader environmental event or happening that includes a sound. The sound is part of an event that also involves cars colliding. One hears the sound, and one hears the broader event involving the cars and the colliding and the disturbing of the medium. One couldn't have heard the broader event if not for hearing its sound, which is part of the reason for saying that one hears the crash in hearing the sound, but one hears the sound as being a constituent part of the broader collision event. The audible sound is akin to the visible facing surface of the table—the sound determines the audible appearance of the broad environmental event that includes the material objects and happenings that count among its sources.

This allows that sounds audibly are non-identical with sound sources, and that sources are heard in hearing their sounds. It allows that sounds are heard as bound with their sources, but doesn't accept that they're heard as audible properties or qualities bound to their sources. So, I'd like to think it captures the spirit of *Phenomenological Independence* and of *Phenomenological Binding* while accommodating *Phenomenological Intimacy*.